



## East Bay charter school chains grow in size and influence

By Katy Murphy  
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OAKLAND -- On Oprah Winfrey's set, mouths flew open and hands reached up to cover them. The audience screamed.

"A million dollars for you. A million dollars for you. A million dollars for you " " the famous host said as she handed out six gigantic checks.

Before the announcement, before the shrieking, Winfrey had introduced the people onstage as educational leaders who "are doing whatever it takes " to make sure that children in our country, your children, succeed." She said she knew thousands of kids were hoping for a seat in one of their schools, and that for some families, getting that seat was akin to winning the lottery -- the premise of "Waiting for 'Superman,'" an education documentary she was promoting on the September show.

The six checks went to privately run, publicly funded, tuition-free charter schools. All but one went to charter school networks, including Aspire Public Schools, an Oakland-based nonprofit that runs seven schools in the East Bay and 30 in California.

At the beginning of the charter movement, nearly 20 years ago, all were small, stand-alone schools. Most still are. But charter chains have grown exponentially, in number, size and influence, with an infusion of cash from foundations and the

government.

Some of the larger networks, such as Aspire, operate on a scale that's comparable to that of a mid-sized school district. A new McKinsey & Company report included Aspire as one of

the 20 most-improved school systems in the world -- along with districts in Long Beach, Boston and Singapore.

Such charter networks may operate largely outside the traditional public school system, but they are front and center in the debate about its future. Most charter teachers aren't represented by a union, making it easier for management to experiment with policies such as teacher pay and evaluation practices, or to institute longer school days.

A group of five organizations, including Aspire, landed a seven-year, \$60 million Gates Foundation grant to develop new teacher preparation, evaluation and compensation systems. Aspire has created a teacher residency program to train future educators in its own classrooms. And this year, the U.S. Department of Education awarded a \$50 million innovation grant to the KIPP Foundation, a national franchise with schools in Oakland, San Lorenzo, San Francisco and San Jose. KIPP offers a longer school day and school year, a practice that President Barack Obama has encouraged other schools to adopt.

The networks came into being, in part, to have a greater influence on education policy. Stand-alone charter schools didn't have the "spillover effect" that some proponents had hoped, said Priscilla Wohlstetter, director of the Center on Educational Governance at the University of Southern California and a visiting professor at Columbia University's Teachers College.

"The philanthropic community came in and said,

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"What happens if we have networks of charters?" Wohlstetter said.

Very little, predicted Diane Ravitch, an education historian at New York University and a Brookings Institution fellow who served as assistant secretary of education under President George H.W. Bush. Ravitch said the expansion of successful charter school networks could benefit the additional children they serve. But, she said, don't expect the investment to change the face of public education in the United States, or to lead to the end of teachers unions.

"The 6 percent or 8 percent or 10 percent of students who enroll in charters or charter chains will not be a game-changer," Ravitch said. "They will not prompt public schools to toss out their senior teachers and hire only newcomers. They will not prompt public schools to change to a nine-hour school day because most teachers have families and want to lead full lives."

Plans to grow

Aspire now educates about 10,000 children in California, more students than most of the state's school districts. By 2020, it aims to expand to 75 schools. The U.S. Department of Education gave Aspire a \$6 million expansion grant this year, with the potential for another award of the same size to follow.

KIPP plans to double in size in the next five years, to 200 schools nationwide. Rocketship Education, a newer Bay Area organization, opened a third school in San Jose this year, and wants to open 30 more by 2015. Its students, who are predominately English-language learners from poor neighborhoods, have test scores that rival those in wealthy Palo Alto. Rocketship announced this fall that it had received a pledge of \$6 million from the Charter School Growth

Fund in Colorado, but its founders say the model doesn't depend on philanthropy. Rocketship students learn on computers for 25 percent of the day, which reduces labor costs.

Amid the push to grow, some researchers have sounded a cautionary note. An interim report by the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education -- a study commissioned by one of the major players in the charter school movement, the San Francisco-based NewSchools Venture Fund -- found the expansion of charter management organizations has proved more difficult than some had imagined. "The big issue is just losing control of quality when they open too many schools too quickly," said Robin Lake, the center's associate director.

Lake and her colleagues found that as organizations grow, they struggle to staff their schools with the right teachers and principals and strain to resist becoming the bureaucratic and hierarchical structures they were created to escape.

Not 'us versus them'

James Willcox, CEO of Aspire Public Schools, is careful to avoid the words "central" or "centralized" to describe the organization's headquarters and its functions. The decade-old nonprofit organization has a human resources department, a technology department, a payroll department and a management team, just like a school district, but a friendlier name: the home office.

And, unlike many school district headquarters, the home office doesn't seem to be a source of widespread distrust or resentment at Aspire schools.

Tatiana Epanchin, who opened an Aspire school in East Oakland last year, said she couldn't have

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imagined doing so without the organization's support. The home office staff took care of such things as furniture acquisition and paperwork, she said, allowing her -- then, the school principal -- and her staff to focus on instruction. "Ultimately, it did not feel like a brand-new school," she said.

Willcox said he wants to avoid the "us-versus-them" dynamic ingrained in so many school districts. "It gets harder and harder, the bigger we get, to talk to everyone," he said. "But it doesn't mean it's impossible."

Lake and Wohlstetter say such expansion isn't likely to continue indefinitely, though, as long as it hinges on the support of private foundations. Philanthropy has its limits, especially during an economic downturn. And, as Willcox has found, there isn't an endless supply of empty buildings suitable for schools. Aspire opened its first school in an former grocery store in Stockton.

#### Oakland's charters

Oakland is home to more than 30 charter schools, which educate about one in six public school children in the city. The city's highest-scoring public middle and high schools are charters, though the majority are not part of a network. Lighthouse Community Charter School, started by a husband and wife, received millions of dollars from the local Rogers Family Foundation to build a state-of-the-art K-12 school near the airport, which opened last year.

But like some of the educational philanthropies, the Oakland school district's administration appears to be more comfortable with the expansion of existing organizations -- Aspire, especially -- than startups without a track record.

David Montes de Oca, a district administrator,

established a notoriously rigorous process for the approval of new charters and the renewal of existing ones. Montes de Oca has told the board the process was designed to ensure the district's charters will be fiscally and procedurally sound and offer a high-quality education to all students. But the process arguably gives an advantage to organizations with the know-how and staff to complete it successfully.

This spring, Montes de Oca noted that for the first time in nearly three years, he was recommending the approval of a new, stand-alone charter school.

#### Story of two charters

Dolores Huerta Learning Academy, one of the Oakland school district's first charter schools, closed in 2009, after more than 10 years in operation. It experienced administrative turmoil in its last year, and some teachers were left to create their own curriculum with little help. The charter school's own board of directors shut it down before it underwent the district's tough renewal process. Its test scores -- already below the district average -- fell even further that year.

After it closed, Aspire moved in. Most of the students from Dolores Huerta enrolled in the new school, ERES Academy.

Luzmaria Vasquez was entering seventh grade at the time. The new school felt strict, Luzmaria said, but it seemed like students were receiving more attention and respect. "We didn't used to get treated like this," she said. "Before, if we were bad, we used to get screamed at."

Sam Humphrey, a second-grade teacher, came to ERES from another school in the network. He said he wanted to experience an Aspire school's opening. "When I first started here, things like homework weren't really something that was done," he said.

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"That quickly turned around."

Test scores released this fall showed that ERES Academy scored a 695 out of a possible 1,000 points on the state's 2010 Academic Performance Index. Though one of the lowest scores in the network, it was nearly 100 points higher than what the students had scored the previous year at Dolores Huerta.

Like many networks, Aspire typically opens schools in poor, urban areas where black and Latino students post low test scores and drop out of school at high rates. Of the 25 Aspire schools that existed last year, 18 scored 800 or higher on the state's Academic Performance Index.

Not all charter schools show as much promise. Their quality varies widely, just like traditional public schools. Lake's team at the University of Washington is examining whether the expansion of successful charter networks, such as Aspire, will lead to better results. So far, she said, that claim has yet to be supported by rigorous research.

California Charter Academy is perhaps the most notorious of cautionary tales about charter chains and the importance of proper oversight. Managed by a for-profit company, it was the largest charter school franchise in the state at the time, with more than 50 satellite sites and 4,500 K-12 students. It shut down suddenly in August 2004, after about five years, sending its students scrambling to find schools. A state audit later found that company executives had misappropriated millions of dollars, including some for personal benefit.

Ravitch had another concern about the charter movement: a deepening "spirit of competition." In the early years, she said, charters were seen as a way to improve public schools by helping the students who were struggling the most, or who were

at risk of dropping out. The pressure to produce high test scores does not encourage charter leaders to seek out the most challenging students, she said.

"The chains need great statistics to keep their funders happy," Ravitch said. Instead of collaborating with traditional public schools, she added, "most charters now see themselves as free-market schools that compete with the public schools, seek to produce better test scores, and demonstrate that they can beat them."

It's partly because of such claims that Willcox said he wants to extend Aspire's reach.

"We need to grow to a size where people can't make the argument any longer that we cherry-pick the best kids," Willcox said. "How big do we need to get to make that point? We don't know."

Read Katy Murphy's Oakland schools blog at [IBAbuzz.com/education](http://IBAbuzz.com/education). Follow her at [Twitter.com/katymurphy](https://twitter.com/katymurphy).

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