Getting to Scale: Ideas, Opportunities, and Resources in the Early Diffusion of the Charter Management Organization, 1999- 2006

RAND QUINN

University of Pennsylvania

CARRIE R. OELBERGER

University of Minnesota

DEBRA MEYERSON

Stanford University

Background/Context: *The concept of scale has gained purchase across social sectors in recent years as organizational leaders and funders seek to maximize the impact of promising social innovations.*

Purpose/Objective: *We apply insights from recent scholarship on ideas as mechanisms for change to explain how the idea of "getting to scale" intersected with political opportunities and human and financial resources in the early diffusion of the charter management organization (CMO).*

Research Design: *As the birthplace and a political locus of the CMO form, California is an ideal vantage point from which to understand the early years of the form's diffusion. We conducted interviews with California CMO and non-CMO leaders, principals, and funders. Our interviews were designed to understand when and why CMO leaders thought about growth, the challenges and opportunities associated with growth, organizational goals and strategic priorities, and whether and how funders shaped CMO development and plans. In addition, we constructed a school-level panel dataset for the 1991–92 to 2006–07 school years using data from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data and the California Department of Education. We included charter organizational form, enrollment, and school founding and closure years. We also joined multiple Foundation Center datasets to create a grant-level dataset for the years 1999 to 2006 that includes grant amount, grant type, recipient, and funder. Finally, we conducted participant and nonparticipant observations at CMO board meetings, foundation staff meetings and presentations, and charter school conferences and meetings.*

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Findings/Results: *Understood and framed as the vehicle for getting to scale, the CMO form drew a disproportionate share of private philanthropy dollars, appealed to a new class of professionals from outside of education, and was successfully distinguished from alternative charter forms, all of which contributed to its early diffusion.*

Conclusions/Recommendations: *We develop a fuller understanding of the charter school movement, describing how the diffusion of the CMO form displaced ideas about school-level autonomy and decentralization in favor of ideas about getting to scale and tipping the system. The study also offers insight to scholars analyzing current and past efforts at educational reform by emphasizing the roles played by ideas, opportunities, and resources.*

Scholars have long acknowledged that education reform is not simply a process of identifying improvements in curricula and pedagogy, or determining the most effective school experience for a given student population. Education reform also involves political processes that align opportunities and resources around conflicting sets of ideas—ideas that are held and proffered by key actors. For example, efforts to reform teacher education are predominantly structured around competing ideas of resourced stakeholders who seek to either professionalize teaching and teacher education or deregulate teacher preparation (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001; Lewis & Young, 2013). In short, defining problems and proposing solutions in education reform—whether for teacher education policy, or, as in our case, the charter school movement—are constrained, guided, and legitimized by the ideas of policy makers, funders, educational leaders, and other stakeholders (Campbell, 2004). Applying insights from recent scholarship on the role ideas play as mechanisms for change, we analyze the early diffusion of the nonprofit charter management organization (CMO), a prominent reform effort that began in the late 1990s from within the broader charter school movement.

CMOs are centralized nonprofit organizations that operate multiple charter schools. We argue that CMOs benefited from and were advanced by paradigms and frames that emphasized the importance of scale. The concept of *scale* has gained purchase across social sectors in recent years as funders and organizational leaders have sought to maximize their per-dollar impact by replicating promising social innovations in new contexts rather than continuously "reinventing the wheel" (Bradach, 2003). *Getting to scale* is an oft-used phrase understood by CMO proponents to mean deliberate and rapid growth in order to generate system-wide impact. (For discussions on scaling school reform, including alternative conceptualizations of *scale*, see Coburn, 2003; Dede, 2006; Elmore, 1996; Frank, Zhao, & Borman, 2004; and McDonald, Keesler, Kauffman, & Schneider, 2006). The idea of bringing effective programs to scale resonates deeply among field actors, particularly social entrepreneurs, for whom common practices in the private sector are comfortable and represent core professional values. Although scaling is intuitively appealing, more empirical data is needed to document its actual achievements and success in achieving the desired goals.

Our findings are divided into two parts, each highlighting different aspects that contributed to the early diffusion of the CMO as a new organizational form. First, we describe the role of political opportunities and resources. Second, we discuss the role of ideas, and how they aligned with dominant paradigms and frames. We argue that the process of CMO diffusion was aided by the fact that the form was perceived and described by proponents as a vehicle for scale, and thus a solution for quality, efficiency, and impact shortfalls seen as existing in the charter movement. As we will show, the CMO form drew a disproportionate share of private philanthropy dollars, appealed to a new class of professionals from outside the field of education, and was successfully distinguished from alternative charter organizational forms, all of which contributed to its diffusion.

Diffusion is fundamentally about spread within a social system (Colyvas & Jonsson, 2011). Drawing upon interviews, archival data, and both participant and nonparticipant observations, we examine how ideas underscoring the importance of scale contributed to the diffusion of the CMO form during its early years, as the form was rapidly spreading but had yet to become institutionalized. It is not our intent to diminish the role of the broad set of factors beyond ideas that help explain education reform, including stakeholder interest and efficacy. On the contrary, as we demonstrate, ideas are often built around such factors. Our analysis of the emergence and rise of the CMO form provides a new understanding of the idea of scale within the charter school movement. By doing so, we illuminate the paradox of recentralization in an educational movement established, in part, as a means to decentralize. In addition to developing a fuller understanding of the charter school movement, the article contributes to broader scholarship on the ideational mechanisms of reform movements.

THE CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT

The charter school method of reform is named after the agreement ("charter") developed by school leaders and approved by a chartering authority (for example, the local school board) that details the educational vision, mission, and goals of the school, and the responsibilities and support to be provided by the government (Budde, 1989). Minnesota enacted the first charter school law in 1991, and much of the country has since followed suit. To date, 43 states and the District of Columbia have adopted charter school laws. Charters now enroll 5.1% of all public school students in approximately 6,000 schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015). Continued growth is likely, as charters have always managed to attract policy makers and education reformers on both the political right and left, and have been a key component of recent presidential administrations' education agendas.

Proponents identify at least three interrelated attributes of charter school reform thought to encourage innovation and improve academic achievement, particularly for low-income students (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). First, proponents often describe charter schools as relatively autonomous. Charters receive a per-pupil allocation of public funds, just as traditional public schools do, but charters are exempt from portions of their state's education code. Furthermore, the charter sector employs a largely nonunion workforce; thus, most charters are free from teacher union agreements and contracts (Finnigan, 2007). In California, our focal state, charter schools hire credentialed teachers, provide the state-mandated minimum number of instructional minutes, and participate in state testing activities (Charter Schools Act of 1992, §47605.6(l); §47612.5(a)(1); §47612.5(a)(3)). But they are exempt from many other district and state regulations. Charter proponents rationalize autonomy as a necessary requirement that fosters experimentation and innovation in curriculum, pedagogy, and structure (e.g., Nathan, 1996—although this claim is contested. See Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Lubienski, 2003).

Second, proponents describe charters as decentralized schools. Many countries have education systems that are highly structured, with strong ministries of education that possess real authority down to individual schools and even individual teachers. By comparison, the system of education in the United States is decentralized, described by some as "ultra-decentralized" (Baker & LeTendre, 2005, p. 141) and "the most complex" of any other system around the world (Wiseman, 2004, p. 172). Instruction has historically been weakly controlled and decoupled from its formal structure (Meyer & Rowan, 1978), and many constituencies have direct influence on schools, including teachers' unions, parent associations, and community advocates. The charter school method of reform, it has been argued, has taken decentralization even further by allowing private sector actors to manage publicly funded schools (Hill, Pierce, & Guthrie, 1997). States that have implemented charter school laws have accepted the loss of some control of program design and organizational structure in exchange for the possibility of an increase in performance-based accountability. Although charters remain under the influence of institutionalized notions of schooling (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009), proponents argue that decentralizing enables and motivates those closest to schools—parents and teachers—to create innovations that better serve their students (Finnigan, 2007; Wohlstetter & Chau, 2004).

Third, proponents often laud the fact that charters are schools of choice in that students and teachers are not assigned to a charter school; they must choose to take part. Proponents argue that this type of school choice benefits the public education system. The underlying idea is that with market-like competition, excellent and innovative teachers and schools are rewarded while substandard teachers and schools are weeded out, ultimately diversifying the types of schools available and improving school quality across the board (Chubb & Moe, 1990). There is, of course, an alternative to the choice argument. Some contend that choice leads to a two-tiered system of public schooling, with a small number of high-performing schools and a large number of underachieving schools (Meier, 1995). Moreover, choice-based systems are compromised in situations where parents are unaware of the full range of school options, do not fully participate, or are unable to shuttle their child to and from a school outside their neighborhood.

CHARTER SCHOOL ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS

The charter sector comprises multiple charter school organizational forms. *Organizational forms* are abstract specifications that are typically inferred by examining theoretically or empirically relevant core features (Carroll & Hannan, 2000; Scott, 2001). Along these lines, we developed our categorization of charter forms by assessing four core charter school features that are theoretically relevant to our study. The four charter school features are (a) legal form—whether a charter is operated by a nonprofit or for-profit corporation; (b) the presence or absence of scaling as a goal; (c) whether or not a charter is a virtual school; and (d) the extent of centralized oversight of a charter school.

These four features led us to identity five categories of charter organizational forms: (a) the virtual school; (b) the "stand-alone" school; (c) the school operated by a for-profit education management organization (EMO); (d) the school operated by a CMO; and (e) the school that is part of a loosely affiliated "cluster" of charter schools. In the rest of this section, we describe these organizational forms in detail, while also elaborating on the process by which we identified these forms.

Virtual Charter

Virtual schools exist primarily online, providing lesson plans and other support for homeschooled and independent study students (for a recent analysis, see Glass & Welner, 2011). Some virtual schools have a building or storefront for recruitment purposes or to host occasional student activities, but they are not for everyday classroom instruction. Some nonprofit organizations that operate multiple virtual schools appear analogous to CMOs at first glance. As indicated above, we had initially identified virtual schools as a theoretically relevant distinguishing feature for categorizing charters. But in our interviews with foundation program officers and charter school leaders, it became clear that virtual schools were widely understood and treated as a distinct group of charters serving a different student population. We consequently regarded virtual charter schools as a distinct organizational form.

Stand-alone Charter

In our interviews, informants referred to single, independently operated schools as "one-off" or "stand-alone" charters. Stand-alones can be very different from one school to the next as they pursue a variety of missions, employ different educational strategies and technologies, and are led by individuals with different professional backgrounds. They are united, however, by a focus on serving the local community. In this way, stand-alones reflect early charter rhetoric extolling a vision of community-based schools accountable to local demands and operated by neighborhood leaders and parents.

EMO

An EMO is a centralized for-profit organization that receives public funds to run multiple public schools, including charters. Similar to stand-alones, EMOs display a variety of organizational strategies and designs. While some EMOs afford considerable independence to local school sites, others employ a top-down approach in which educational methods are rigidly imposed. By 2002, EMOs were managing as many as 10% of all charter schools in the nation (Molnar, Wilson, Restori, & Hutchison, 2002). As EMOs began developing into a major sector within the charter school field, they faced pockets of challenges to their legitimacy. However, in recent years the number of EMO-managed charter schools has steadily increased, albeit at a slower rate (Miron & Gulosino, 2013).

Cluster of Loosely Affiliated Charter Schools

In the course of our data collection, a distinction emerged involving the extent of centralized oversight of a charter school: whether it is an independent entity, affiliated with a decentralized network of other charter schools, or operated by a central authority. This led us to identify "clusters" of loosely affiliated charter schools as a distinct form. We define the charter cluster as a network of two or more charter schools linked by name, founder, or other tie. Clusters share some degree of similarity across curriculum, managerial ideology, school culture, and operations. But unlike EMOs and CMOs, clusters have no aspiration to scale as a means to influence the broader public education system. Some clusters were formed as a second local school spun out from a stand-alone—for example, the establishment of a new charter middle school to create a similar educational environment for students who advanced from a charter elementary. In other cases, community organizations (e.g., museums, nonprofit housing developers) established a small cluster of charter schools primarily to complement their work. As we describe in our findings section, the distinction between cluster and CMO is important to understanding the charter field.

CMO

The focus of this article is the CMO, a centralized nonprofit organization that runs multiple charter schools. The term was introduced by NewSchools Venture Fund (NSVF), a "venture philanthropy" established in 1999, in an effort to draw a distinction from the EMO form (Wilson, Levin, & Mathews, 2005). Similar to the typical EMO, CMOs utilize common instructional models and school designs to achieve economies of scale in the delivery of education. However, the CMO form is not understood to simply be about operational efficiency. CMOs are argued to be more likely than their for-profit EMO counterparts to possess an explicit focus on academic accountability (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009). And some CMOs have successfully developed "the knowledge, know-how, and other capabilities" required for improving teaching and learning at scale (Cohen, Peurach, Glazer, Gates, & Goldin, 2013, p. 179). Furthermore, CMOs are nonprofit organizations, and thus "soften" the political opposition they might have faced as for-profits (Wilson et al., 2005, p. 124).

The theory of action underlying the CMO, termed "management recentralization," is built on the idea that the charter method of reform has progressed too slowly and has yet to produce enough high-performing schools to influence the broader public school system (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009, p. 420). The solution is rapid diffusion of the CMO form (Farrell, Wohlstetter, & Smith, 2012). By 2007, the number of CMO-operated schools was growing at an average annual rate of 12% (Lake, Dusseault, Bowen, Demeritt, & Hill, 2010), and by 2011, there were an estimated 1,060 CMO-operated schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015). A crucial part of this growth was due to the substantial support the form has received from large-scale philanthropy (Reckhow, 2013). (We provide a more textured description of the early diffusion of the CMO in our findings section.)

Generalized conclusions about charter schools can mask patterned differences across charter organizational forms. For example, because of fundamental differences in motivation, the "market-oriented" EMO is more likely to seek large enrollments in pursuit of economies of scale, while the "mission-oriented" nonprofit charter operator will tend to serve smaller numbers of students in pursuit of academic quality (Henig, Holyoke, Brown, & Lacireno-Paquet, 2005). And a recent study of charter identity emergence found that charters in Arizona tended to identify either as schools that addressed unmet needs of students and their families or as schools that sought to supplement the traditional educational experience through creative and alternative teaching methods; these two categories of schools have evolved with different goals, actors, and designs (King, Clemens, & Fry, 2011). But while researchers have identified variation across multiple types of charter schools, the question of how new organizational forms take hold within the charter movement remains. Our study tackles this puzzle by explaining the early diffusion of the CMO form.

LITERATURE REVIEW: IDEAS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND RESOURCES

Analysts of policy processes and agenda setting claim that "participants traffic in the world of ideas" (Kingdon, 1993, p. 45). Indeed, scholarship on ideas as mechanisms for change can help bring an understanding to the early diffusion of the charter management organization. Here, we define *ideas* as normative claims and causal explanations about specific conditions or actions in the world (Parsons, 2002). Ideas include both *paradigms,* the underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions that exist in the background of debate, and *frames,* the foreground concepts and theories that are articulated and utilized strategically by decision makers and other actors (Campbell, 2004). Importantly, ideas are deployed to advance particular interests. By examining how people attempt to persuade one another, we gain insight into both the dynamics of attitude change as well as the structure of perception (Billig, 1996). In recent years, scholars have brought a deeper and more complex understanding of the role such ideas may play in the policy process (Béland, 2009; Steensland, 2006). Within policy debates, oppositional ideas represent the interests of different actors. These contrasting ideas become "ideological dilemmas" that need to be resolved in order for action to be taken and for some level of change to occur (Billig et al., 1988).

PARADIGMS AS IDEAS OPERATING IN THE BACKGROUND OF DEBATE

Decision makers are constrained and guided by paradigms—shared systems of taken-for-granted ideas that are institutionalized into the policies and practices of a community (Campbell, 2004). Paradigms specify "not only the goals of the policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing" (Hall, 1993, p. 279). In this way, ideas are embedded in institutional arrangements and hold the power to shape, structure, and change regimes (Somers & Block, 2005). Occasionally, significant and far-reaching cultural changes occur that lead to paradigm shifts. For instance, Hall (1993) analyzes Britain's radical move away from a Keynesian policy paradigm by drawing inspiration from Thomas Kuhn's (1962) theory of scientific revolutions. Beginning in the 1970s, trends in the economy, most notably rising inflation joined with increased unemployment, were "anomalies" that could not be anticipated or accounted for through Keynesian analyses. This resulted in a succession of false forecasts and policy failures that ultimately called into question Keynesian ideas and paved the way for a new paradigm based on monetarism (Hall, 1993).

These insights on policy paradigms are transferable to education reform. For example, Mehta (2013) identifies a shift over the last 3 decades toward a paradigm of accountability in American education. A set of taken-for-granted ideas has tied education to economic success and asserted the primacy of schools over social forces as the determinant of academic achievement (Mehta, 2013). These ideas "crystallized" with *A Nation at Risk*—the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education—and became increasingly dominant through subsequent reforms (Mehta, 2013, p. 286). The paradigm of accountability challenged earlier notions of decoupled school systems (Meyer & Rowan, 1978) by reshaping political environments in ways that facilitated a wave of policies and programs built on ideas of standards, external assessments, and strengthened federal control over schooling (Mehta, 2013).

FRAMES AS IDEAS OPERATING IN THE FOREGROUND OF DEBATE

Whereas paradigms are types of ideas that reside in the background of decision-making debates, frames operate in the foreground. Stakeholders strategically frame ideas in order to mobilize others in support of their cause and to advance their interests, be they material (e.g., the potential to gain financial or other resources), social (e.g., the potential to improve reputation or social standing), or moral (e.g., the potential to feel positively about one's contribution).[1] As such, the process of framing is often politically contentious and continually negotiated (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Frames include the "metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues" that assign meaning in policy and reform contexts (Zald, 1998, p. 262). Extending Goffman's (1974) work on frame analysis, scholars have shown how policy change depends in part on articulate and coherent frames that identify a problem, assign culpability, and present solutions (Cress & Snow, 2000). In an analogous way, Tyack and Cuban (1995) refer to policy talk in education as "diagnoses of problems and advocacy of solutions" (p. 40). It is the policy talk about the problems of schools and their associated solutions that can drive reform efforts in the face of inertial institutional trends in education.

For example, Coburn (2006) analyzes problem framing within a California school over the course of a year. The principal and teachers made sense of a new statewide reading policy initiative through a contested and recursive process of framing, negotiation, and reframing until the problem of reading instruction was described in a way that resonated with faculty holding varied worldviews and interests. Resonant frames—for example, frames invoking social justice—motivated teachers to make changes to their instructional practice. Similarly, Grossman (2010) incorporates the framing concept to explain how a group of teachers and administrators successfully protested the planned elimination of an exemption from New York's high school graduation exam. Support from policy makers came about as activists strategically framed their efforts as a fight for student equity. By identifying various problems with the exam, particularly its disproportionate negative impact for African American and Latino students, while also presenting the viable alternative of performance-based assessments, activists shaped policy makers' views of the issue in ways that resonated with their agenda.

Framing is a "jointly constituted" process (Westby, 2005, p. 220). Actors strategically craft frames to resonate with relevant constituencies, justify organizational structures and activities, and influence decision makers to consider preferred alternatives. But to be effective, frames must also be derived from prevailing paradigms, sentiments, and ideologies operating in the background of debate (Billig, 1996; Snow & Benford, 2005). An example of this dual composition can be found in McCammon, Muse, Newman, and Terrell's (2007) study of activist movements that sought state-level policy reforms to extend to women the right to sit on juries. Strategically constructed frames were most successful at influencing policy makers when they were drawn from salient beliefs and values present in the broader environment. In this study, we therefore acknowledge the joint constitution of ideas by bringing together analyses of both background paradigms and foreground frames in the charter school sector.

THE INTERSECTION OF PARADIGMS AND FRAMES WITH POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES AND RESOURCES

Scholars have incorporated analyses of ideas—background and foreground, and in their various forms—into work addressing the trajectory and impact of social movement activity, as is the case with several of the studies described above. *Social movements* are sustained campaigns of claim making meant to bring about social change (Tilly & Tarrow, 2006). In recent decades, an agenda emerged that brings together micro, meso, and macro lines of social movement research by emphasizing the dynamic interaction of ideas (most often cultural frames), organizational resources, and political opportunities and threats (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly 2001; Snow & Soule, 2010). Apart from scholarship on cultural frames, resource mobilization perspectives place the formal social movement organization at the center of analysis and emphasize the availability of organizational resources as a factor for understanding social movements (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Political process theories argue that it isn't solely about frames and resources. Broad structural changes that alter the disparity between those with power and those without create new political opportunities or threats that also effect the emergence and trajectory of social movements (McAdam, 1999).

This agenda of ideas, organizational resources, and political opportunities and threats helps illuminate how background and foreground ideas of interest-driven actors intersect with political opportunities and the distribution of resources in the diffusion of new organizational forms (e.g., McAdam & Scott, 2005; Schneiberg, King, & Smith 2008; Swaminathan & Wade, 2001). For instance, alternative dispute resolution (ADR) organizations emerged over the last several decades as a legitimate substitute for handling relationally based disputes. ADR enjoyed the support of influential actors who leveraged political opportunities arising from the interstices of the sociolegal and social services fields concerning a perceived overadjudication in the legal system. The American Bar Association, members of the U.S. Justice Department, and Chief Justice Warren Burger mobilized resources, staked out professional jurisdictions, and developed resonant frames that encouraged legal professionals to embrace ADR (Morrill, 2006).

The recent rise of a mainstream recycling infrastructure has been explained through a similar set of processes. Through the 1970s, recycling was organized around marginal nonprofit and voluntary action focused on community building. However, environmental legislation in the late 1970s produced political opportunities allowing industry lobbyists, grassroots activists, and government officials to reframe recycling and facilitate the emergence of a new industry largely dominated by for-profit waste management corporations (Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch, 2003).

Institutional developments are not simply organic or evolutionary. As these studies highlight, the patronage of influential actors is important to the eventual institutionalization of a new organizational form. In contrast to the sponsorship ADR received, Morrill (2006) surmises that a lack of sponsorship led to the marginalization of alternative medical fields such as chiropractic and homeopathic therapies. As the target of continual challenges from the traditional medical establishment, alternative medicine proponents were never viewed as credible complements to conventional doctors.

Often, the goal of a social movement is to reform public policy. Thus, it's unsurprising that scholars have utilized a social movement perspective to illuminate the political and cultural processes involved in education reform (e.g., Grossman, 2010; Rojas, 2007). It is from this theoretical vantage point that we sought to examine the role of ideas in the early diffusion of the CMO form. If diffusion is fundamentally a story of "how things flow" (Colyvas & Jonsson, 2011, p. 30), we examine the new organizational form of a CMO as a "thing" that flows. The CMO is a charter reform effort within the broader charter school movement that reflects the goals and values of resourced actors who capitalized on political opportunities within the charter school field.

We describe a *paradigm of scale* as a set of shared ideas operating in the background of charter reform debates that limited the range of solutions stakeholders conceived of as possible and attractive. "Getting to scale" entailed more than simply increasing the number of schools established and the number of students enrolled. It implied rapidity and consistency. Scaling up meant achieving a deliberate and rapid rate of growth while maintaining a consistently high level of quality. The appropriate means for ensuring quality was centralized control over school-level academics, operations, administration, and culture. To reach scale meant that a charter organization had potential to induce improvements in the broader public school system, either through competition or collaboration with district-operated schools.

In addition, the paradigm of scale structured the strategically crafted problem and solution framing that stakeholders engaged in the foreground of charter reform debates. Foundation program officers described the CMO as a form designed to scale. Alongside benefitting from any potential economies of scale, organizations that were deemed scalable were framed as the appropriate solution to shortfalls in education reform. These sentiments were echoed by CMO leaders. Organizational capacity to scale was a metric used by high-engagement foundations to assess potential grantees (Quinn, Tompkins-Stange, & Meyerson, 2014). This was to the benefit of the CMO organizational form, garnering it legitimacy and resources.

In this article, we emphasize the need to pay attention to background and foreground ideas operating among and interpreted by those who contribute the material and human resources in an education reform effort. In so doing, we answer a recent call to integrate literature from different domains in examining the impact of social structure on the political orientations of social movements (Walder, 2009).

METHODS

As the birthplace and a political locus of the CMO form, California is an ideal vantage point from which to understand the earliest years of the form's diffusion. In 1992, California became the second state to adopt charter school legislation. As of the 2014–15 school year, 544,980 of the state's students were enrolled in 1,179 charter schools, representing approximately 9% of all public school students in California and just over 12% of all California public schools (California Department of Education, Education Data Partnership, 2016). California enrolls approximately 20% of the total number of charter school students nationwide, more than twice the number of charter students in Texas, the next largest charter-enrolling state (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015). Today, approximately 80% of all CMO-run schools operate in four states (Furgeson et al., 2012). California is among this group with, under one definition, as many as 34 CMOs operating 128 schools (Edwards, Crane, Barondess, & Perry, 2009).

DATA SOURCES

We relied on three sources of data: interviews, archival sources, and participant and nonparticipant observations. Because we were interested in the early diffusion of the CMO form, our focal period was 1999 to 2006—the years immediately following the establishment of what was soon recognized as the first CMO, Aspire Public Schools (Farrell et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2005).

Interviews

We interviewed a total of 41 informants (see Table 1 for a partial list). Our sample was composed of 18 CMO founders and executives from eight of the largest and most prominent CMOs during our focal period. (We catalogued 14 California CMOs in operation during the 2006–07 school year. Our subsample of CMO founders and executives included informants from CMOs operating 108 of the 148 CMO-operated schools and enrolling 17,901 of the 24,481 students in 2006.) In addition, we interviewed 12 executives and senior program officers from six major CMO funders, seven executives from six non-CMO charter organizations, and four principals of CMO-managed schools. Our interviews focused on CMO emergence and diffusion. The protocol for our interviews with CMO founders and executives was designed to understand when and why CMO leaders thought about growth, the challenges and opportunities associated with growth, organizational goals and strategic priorities, and whether and how funders shaped CMO development and plans (see Appendix A for sample questions).

Table 1. Informants (Partial List)

Pseudonym	Title	Organization (Pseudonym)	Type
Antonio	Founder & Executive	Touchstone	CMO
Brandon	Founder & CEO	Succeed	CMO
Corrine	Program Officer	Support	Funder
Daphne	Program Officer	Foster	Funder
Esther	Founder & CEO	Talent	CMO
Frank	Program Officer	Windfall	Funder
Gloria	Founder	Rainbow	non-CMO
Irene	Executive	Benefit	Funder
Johnny	Program Officer	Advantage	Funder
Kyle	Chief Education Officer	Sunshine	CMO
Lawrence	Executive	Creative	CMO
Maria	Executive	Ovation	CMO
Neil	Founder	Peak	non-CMO
Oscar	Executive	Visionary	CMO
Phillip	Founder & CEO	Ovation	CMO
Rhoda	Director	Galaxy	non-CMO
Steven	Founder & CEO	Sunshine	CMO
Theodore	Program Officer	Windfall	Funder

The foundation executives and senior program officers we interviewed represented six prominent funders that together provided 81% of all philanthropic dollars allocated to California CMOs from 1999 to 2006, based on our own calculations. From these experts, we sought to understand grant making across charter school forms, including the applicant-selection process and whether and to what extent grantees are held accountable for particular categories of performance. We also sought to learn about other funder-initiated activities (e.g., technical assistance, professional development, and conferences for charter schools), why funders engage in them, and other details about funder priorities and initiatives. Nearly all of our interviews were conducted in person, digitally recorded, and professionally transcribed. For those informants who requested that we not record their responses, we took notes and wrote summary memos.

Archival Data

We relied on multiple sources of archival data to understand and track diffusion trends of CMO and other charter school forms from the 1992 passage of the state charter school law to 2007. To identify school-level enrollment by year, we combined school-enrollment data from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (CCD) with charter school founding and closure dates from the California Department of Education (CDE). This was necessary because CCD didn't distinguish between charter and noncharter schools until 1998.

To understand the role of philanthropic resources in the diffusion of charter organizational forms, we joined multiple Foundation Center datasets (each spanning 1–3 years) to ascertain philanthropic funding patterns in education, including funding patterns across charter school forms, from 1999 to 2006. The Foundation Center datasets tracked grants of $10,000 and above from the 6,000 largest foundations in the nation. We cleaned these data to eliminate duplicates, and we prorated multiyear grants. To these, we added grants from a funder not contained in the Foundation Center databases due to its legal structure.[2] We cross-checked our database with grant-level data acquired from annual reports and IRS Form 990-PF and 990 filings from prominent funders and CMOs. From here, we matched school enrollment to foundation grant support by year for every charter school in California, from 1999 to 2006. These data help us understand the diffusion of charter organizational forms.

Precise figures on total philanthropic giving during our focal period are very difficult to obtain. Grants made by private foundations from 1999 to 2006 may be underreported in the Foundation Center databases. Furthermore, there was no viable way to track individual donor trends during this period. Our purpose in presenting financial data is not to identify the exact dollar amount entering the field, but rather the relative magnitude of funding directed to CMOs compared to other charter forms over time. The figures we cite from our analysis of the Foundation Center datasets and private foundation tax filings accurately present the relative funding allocated to different charter forms. We are therefore confident that our inferences based on these data are valid.

Participant and Nonparticipant Observations

From 2002 to 2006, we were participant and nonparticipant observers at CMO board meetings, foundation staff meetings and presentations, and charter school conferences and meetings. Observational data served different purposes throughout the study. Early observations of CMO board meetings helped us generate questions about funders' influence on organizational priorities and goals. For 15 months, one author periodically participated in a foundation's staff meetings and was given access to internal memos, presentations, and grant contracts. These meetings provided data on foundation goals, strategies, staffing priorities, evaluation criteria, metrics, and challenges. Field notes and documents of these meetings were kept in a separate file to maintain confidentiality, and we avoid direct attributions to sources to protect their anonymity. Participation in nine different charter school conferences, meetings, and events over the course of the study helped us develop a framework for understanding the influence of ideas, paradigms of scale, and the role of resources in the differential growth patterns within the movement. During interviews later in the study, we followed up on these emerging inferences. Although observations were not a core component of the data for this article, they were pivotal for shaping our understanding of the context and forces at play in the California charter school movement and the diffusion of the CMO form.

DATA ANALYSIS

To track the early diffusion of the CMO, our first task was to code all California charter schools in our sample by organizational form. For the majority of these schools, we were able to easily determine organizational form by checking school websites, contacting school leaders, and inferring from information provided by the CDE charter schools division. However, in a handful of cases we had difficulty determining whether a set of affiliated schools should be considered a CMO or a "cluster." The distinction between CMO and cluster was often due more to socially constructed identification rather than objective features—whether, for example, key CMO stakeholders recognized a charter organization as a CMO or not. Accordingly, for these cases, we referred to a list of California CMOs produced by NewSchools Venture Fund. The NSVF criteria were very similar to ours: CMOs are organizations that "operate [multiple] schools, have been nonprofit since their inception, and have not contracted out the operation of their schools to another private entity. Their central administrative office exercises sufficient authority that it can hire or fire principals. They are neither solely drop-out recovery programs nor 'virtual schools' without any bricks and mortar schools."

We determined enrollment growth trajectories of different charter school forms and compared those with philanthropic patterns of support in education. To accomplish this, we coded Foundation Center grant data by category of support. In some situations, grant information was missing or unclear (for example, whether or not a particular nonprofit was a charter support organization, or whether a particular school was public or private). To resolve this, we relied on grant recipient websites and online resources.

As is characteristic of an inductive approach, analysis of our qualitative data was interspersed with and informed different phases of data collection. Members of the research team read through the first round of interviews to develop familiarity with the data and to construct an initial set of abstract categories (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Some of our early categories, such as "metrics," "professional identity," and "administrative model" emerged from the data; others mapped onto general themes in the interview protocols, such as "growth or scaling," "funder involvement," and "theories of change." A second phase of analysis involved developing case narratives of CMOs identified by our informants as among the most prominent in the state. Our intent in this phase was to organize emerging themes into contextualized narratives (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). The analysis relied on data from the first round of interviews and secondary published case accounts of charter organizations. The narratives illuminated gaps in our understanding that required further analysis, and ultimately assisted in our understanding of the order of events, the role of various stakeholders, differences and similarities across cases, and areas necessitating future data collection.

We followed this phase with additional data collection to fill gaps, to assess the viability of alternative explanations, and to explore emerging relationships further. For example, the narratives pointed to preference among certain funders for the CMO form. We consequently sought out charter school clusters that had not received grants from the same class of funders to compare their trajectories, goals, values, and staffing patterns to those of the CMOs in our sample. During a third phase, we subjected interview data to second and third levels of coding for more fine-grained analyses.

Our final phase of analysis involved developing themes and tentative relationships from the entire corpus of data, including the coded interview data. During this phase, we had numerous team meetings to discuss alternative conceptual frameworks and interpretations, and we developed memos based on the interview data to tease out recurring themes, higher level constructs, and potential processes. We read through our observational field notes of meetings and conferences as well as published documents from those events to triangulate inferences from other sources of data. As is common during this stage of analysis, we compared our inferences and frameworks with explanations suggested by prior research (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006).

THE EARLY DIFFUSION OF THE CHARTER MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION

The processes involved in both the emergence and early diffusion of a new organizational form are intertwined. Therefore, as an initial step to understanding the role of paradigms and frames in the early diffusion of the CMO form, we discuss the landscape of the late 1990s that facilitated the form's emergence. Two broad conditions provided a favorable environment: growing faith in entrepreneurial, market-based approaches to social problems, and an emerging class of entrepreneurs backed by swelling pools of philanthropic resources. Within the charter sector, despite rapid growth, concerns arose over inconsistent educational quality, operational inefficiencies, and lack of systemic impact. We discuss how these conditions led to the 1999 establishment of Aspire Public Schools, a charter operator recognized as the very first CMO (Farrell et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2005).

We then discuss how background and foreground ideas of scale facilitated the early diffusion of the CMO form. By the end of our focal period, the 2006–07 school year, the CMO represented the fastest growing segment of the charter school sector. Because the CMO was understood by education philanthropists and entrepreneurs to be the charter organizational form best suited for scale, proponents were able to mobilize both private philanthropy and human capital resources. In addition, proponents strategically crafted arguments—directed at funders, primarily—that the CMO was distinct from and superior to alternative charter organizational forms, particularly the stand-alone charter school.

POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE CMO FORM

By the 1980s, neoliberal ideology, which privileges market mechanisms as a solution to social problems, gained widespread acceptance in American politics and culture. While earlier political discourse favored high levels of government involvement in social programs, neoliberal logic dictated a transfer of formerly public sector responsibilities to private sector organizations. The market perspective generally embraces profit-making through unfettered growth and scaling. With regard to K-12 public education, increased numbers of private actors, both for-profit and nonprofit, engaged in an expanding set of activities and became "more closely intertwined with the daily operations and provision of public education" than ever before (Bulkley & Burch, 2011, p. 237).

Concurrently, the rise of the technology sector produced enormous private wealth and a growing population of new philanthropists. The Foundation Center estimates that between 1990 and 2000, the number of grant-making foundations increased by 75% (from 32,401 to 56,582) and total foundation assets grew from $142.5 billion to $486.1 billion (unadjusted dollars) (Lawrence & Mukai, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In alignment with the ideological perspectives of the day, several foundations, new and old, adopted market-based perspectives and language from the for-profit sector. Describing their brand of philanthropy as "strategic" and "venture," these high-engagement foundations distinguished their efforts from those of traditional foundations by claiming they conducted due diligence to screen out poor investment decisions, held grantees accountable to specific performance milestones, and offered ongoing consultation on the management of their grantees (Frumkin, 2003; Scott, 2009). Moreover, rather than funding organizations with limited or local impact, high-engagement philanthropists sought to "maximize their return on investment" by funding ventures that could "scale up" through rapid replication. In one of several similar examples, a prominent funder emphasized to us the importance of supporting grantees that could create "catalytic impact" and that possessed "potential implications beyond the local, even if their operations are local" *(Irene, Executive, Benefit Foundation).* (All italicized names and organizations are pseudonyms.)

This orientation among philanthropists was mirrored by grantees, many of whose leaders had credentials in management and self-identified as social or educational entrepreneurs. Although entrepreneurial individuals throughout history have successfully tackled social issues, in recent years "social entrepreneur" and "educational entrepreneur" have become identity claims intended to distinguish the work of those who recognize and pursue new opportunities, seek solutions outside the traditional system, build scalable ventures as a means of generating systemic social impact, and act "boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand" (Dees, 2001, p. 4; Smith & Petersen, 2006).

Both sets of actors—high-engagement philanthropists and educational entrepreneurs—across ideological lines were attracted to the charter school method of reform (Hassel, 2008; Scott, 2009). Early proponents used the attributes of autonomy, decentralization, and choice to maintain that charter schools were more accountable to the needs and concerns of parents, teachers, and the government (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000; Hill & Lake, 2002). Charter schools were positioned as a market-oriented reform that delivered competition to the traditional public school system. Charter schools could be managed by individuals with backgrounds from outside of the education sector, and because charters were free from many of the constraining government and union regulations, they were promoted as sites of innovation.

Despite the rapid growth of charter schools and their appeal to philanthropists and educational entrepreneurs, by the late 1990s evaluation studies of charters had raised concern. Contemporary critics argued that accountability systems for student performance were lacking (e.g., Bracey, 2002; Wells, 2002). Several studies produced during this period found authorizers to be more concerned with whether or not charters complied with applicable laws, were financially solvent, and avoided scandal, rather than assessing whether charters actually improved student performance (e.g., Bracey, 2002; Gill, Timpane, Ross, & Brewer, 2001; Hill, Angel, & Christensen, 2006). Moreover, studies evaluating the performance of charter school students had yet to coalesce. Some studies suggested that charter students outperform their district peers (e.g., Hoxby, 2004), while other studies drew null or negative conclusions (e.g., Buddin & Zimmer, 2003; Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2005). Charter proponents attributed this lack of clear consensus to the performance of subpar charters canceling out the performance of high-achieving charters (Fuller 2000; Gill et al., 2001; Hill et al., 2006). Our focus here is on the contested nature of charter effectiveness during the early years of the charter movement. However, charter effectiveness remains a contested issue to this day (see, for example, Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013, and the resulting debate).

It was within this context that the CMO was first established, building on some of the perceived strengths of the charter method of reform but distinguishing itself from identified accountability and performance shortfalls. In 1998, Don Shalvey, a former district superintendent who at the time was running a stand-alone charter school, teamed up with Reed Hastings, a high-tech entrepreneur and philanthropist, to launch Aspire Public Schools, recognized as the first CMO (Farrell et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2005). Aspire was conceived as a venture to grow and manage a system of high-quality charter schools. The model called for standard guidelines for curriculum, instruction, and operation across all schools, with limited room for local adjustment. “We decided we wanted very high consistency and control in terms of the education program as well on the business side of things," remarked a senior member of Aspire's leadership team. "In order to really have an organization that stood for high quality… we had to have some consistency. It couldn't just be *let a thousand flowers bloom.*" This consistency across charter schools was a departure from the traditional charter movement's focus on school-level autonomy and decentralization.

Aspire embodied the ambitions, values, and professional orientations of Shalvey and Hastings, drawing upon the reputations of both men in their respective fields. As a career educator, Shalvey's gave legitimacy to the idea that their model would provide students with a high-quality, college-track education. As founder and CEO of Pure Software, and later as cofounder and CEO of Netflix, Hastings brought business acumen and credibility to the table. His involvement signaled to stakeholders that Aspire would operate with sound managerial practices and would be infused with entrepreneurial aspirations for bold, system-wide change.

Shalvey and Hastings first met in 1997 during a ceremony in which President Clinton announced a new federal initiative to provide charter school funding (Leschly, 2004). They became better acquainted through their involvement in a campaign to eliminate a legislatively imposed cap on the total number of charter schools allowed in California (a feature also found in other state charter laws). Both believed that charter schools would not realize their potential for systemic reform if growth was restricted, and both recognized the political opportunity that resulted when the state's charter law was amended to effectively lift the cap: without a cap, there would be no state-imposed barrier to scaling up charter school reform.[3]

Shalvey and Hastings framed Aspire's model as *the* vehicle to address various shortcomings of the charter movement and to mobilize other influential actors interested in education reform. During its early years, Aspire's stated vision, in part, was "to reshape local public school systems," and its mission was "to raise the academic achievement of California's diverse students; to develop outstanding educators; to catalyze change in public schools; and, to share […] successful practices with other forward-thinking educators" (Aspire Public Schools, 2001). Shalvey and Hastings sought a broad impact that would reach beyond those students enrolled in Aspire schools—they envisioned the transformation of public education in California.

Aspire's leaders were quickly able to position the organization as one that could ensure a strong educational program, develop systems to achieve operational efficiencies, and establish multiple schools that collectively would create the clout necessary to effect systemic change. Aspire, to its backers, was an entrepreneurial venture with a mission to "tip"

California. In this way, it differed conceptually from the localized orientation of stand-alone charter schools founded by neighborhood parents, local educators, or community members, and focused on serving just the immediate community. According to Shalvey:

> We never believed we were going to be a few schools. We never knew what too many was. We believed that our work was to grow a significant number of schools in a small number of clusters in order to create change. We envisioned that change would either come from one single organization like Aspire or three or four new organizations founded and grown by Aspire team members. (D. Shalvey, personal communication, October 1, 2005)

At the same time Aspire was taking shape, Silicon Valley venture capitalists John Doerr and Brook Byers were looking to apply an investment approach to public education. In 1998, they recruited Kim Smith and established New Schools Fund, later renamed "NewSchools Venture Fund" (NSVF), a venture philanthropy firm dedicated to reforming public education by funding education entrepreneurs to "start-up, speed-up and restart K-12 schools" (New Schools Fund, 1998). Smith, an MBA student at Stanford University and an early member of Teach for America's leadership team, personified the blended expertise of business and education Doerr and Byers believed was necessary for systemic change. Aspire Public Schools would become one of NSVF's first investments, and the organizational model Aspire offered came to be known as the *charter management organization,* a term Smith devised to distinguish it from existing charter organizational forms.

By the late 1990s, educational entrepreneurs and high-engagement funders increasingly advocated for the CMO form as an avenue through which to reform education. In 1999, two CMOs, Inner City Education Foundation and Partnerships to Uplift Communities, opened their first schools in Los Angeles. An additional two CMOs were established in 2000: High Tech High in San Diego and Green Dot Public Schools in Los Angeles. Today, Aspire operates 38 schools with a combined enrollment exceeding 14,600 students. Across the nation, there are upwards of 1,800 CMO-operated charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015). There are discrepancies among the various studies that catalog and assess CMOs (e.g., Farrell et al., 2012; Furgeson et al., 2012; Miron & Gulosino, 2013) as researchers employ different definitions of the CMO form. Unclear or contested boundaries are not uncommon for new organizational forms. But regardless of definition, CMOs have enjoyed significant growth.

IDEAS AND THE EARLY DIFFUSION OF THE CMO FORM

We now turn to our core findings on the role of ideas in the early diffusion of the CMO form. The CMO benefited from and was advanced by paradigms and frames emphasizing the value of scale. This allowed the form to draw a disproportionate share of private philanthropy dollars, to attract professionals from outside of education, and to be positioned as an effective and distinct charter organizational form, all of which further contributed to its growth.

A Paradigm of Scale and the Mobilization of Resources

During the initial growth years of the CMO, high-engagement philanthropists and educational entrepreneurs understood and justified the form as the "entrepreneurial" solution to existing charter shortfalls. Perceived problems with the stand-alone form were of particular focus. Among CMO proponents, it was widely believed that the stand-alone form was not structured to achieve operational or economic efficiencies and that its leaders did not possess the managerial expertise to run them well. The CMO represented the vanguard of the charter movement, and the poor quality of some stand-alone charters was understood to be damaging the movement as a whole:

> From a movement's perspective, in my opinion, we need to shut down the bad charter schools. They are putting egg on all of our faces. We need to encourage more innovation of the [*"Touchstones"*] and the [*"Achievers"*] and perhaps some of the [*"Sunshine"*] ones [i.e., CMOs] and then throw public and private money… and create more of the best ones. *(Antonio, Founder & Executive, Touchstone CMO)*

Even more than the issue of quality, CMO proponents were critical of the absence—by definition—of an aspiration to scale among stand-alone charter school leaders. Getting to scale was widely understood to be the mechanism to generate internal knowledge and skills. "Our own internal learning was important," remarked one CMO executive reflecting on his organization's rationale for growth. "With one school you learn a ton. To have all that learning lost is a shame. [Our second school] built on what we learned from [our first school]" *(Kyle, Chief Education Officer, Sunshine CMO).*

Furthermore, despite growing numbers of charter schools, proponents were troubled that the movement had failed to accrue the collective clout to "tip the system," whether in reference to state, city, or school district systems. The CMO form and its ability to scale were understood to be the solution. For example, a senior executive at *Visionary CMO* described the formula to determine the number of charters to be operated or students to be enrolled: "What is it going to take to get the district to pay attention and copy us?" *(Oscar, Executive, Visionary CMO).* Similarly, a senior executive at *Ovation* offered the following theory of change:

> From the beginning our mission as an organization has been to tip the system, … to basically change public education in California, not just to serve a group of kids well, right? I mean, it's been both, we want to serve our kids well *and* we want that to be a catalyst for changing the system.… I don't think that you can be a catalyst for changing the system without having some scale. *(Maria, Executive, Ovation CMO)*

While getting to scale afforded the potential to tip the system, it created new demands. "It's balancing the growth and how good we want the quality to be," remarked the founder and CEO of *Succeed CMO,* describing his greatest challenge. He continued:

> We had the highest test scores in the state for African American students. We [scored over 770 on our Academic Performance Index, API] for the high school. [We] start opening other schools and our bandwidth to keep moving forward when you're … at nine schools instead of three. If I was just at three schools right now, they'd all be over 800 [on the API]. (*Brandon, founder & CEO, Succeed CMO)*

The rationale of scale among CMO leaders was echoed by philanthropists. Foundation program officers we interviewed emphasized that scaling up the CMO form was the best way to transform the traditional urban public education system while still maintaining quality across individual schools. "If you can't scale with quality it kills everything, all the arguments," stated a program officer from a large CMO funder. "The idea is to bet on those that can scale faster with more quality, but we don't know yet who can do that well" *(Daphne, Program Officer, Foster Foundation).* Referencing *Ovation's* mission, a funder explained:

> In California, for instance, [*Ovation CMO's*] theory of change is about state-level impact. So they project quite a large scale of…100 [schools]. I think they're at 50 now or 49 or something like that because they want to meet a scale that's a sizable district in California, to be able to say like, "We're the same size as Fresno [Unified School District]," or something like that, right? To have

> state-level impact on policy and just be taken seriously as a very, you know, a scaled, large-scale *district,* in quotes. *(Irene, Executive, Benefit Foundation)*

Scale was continually reinforced through foundation grantmaking. Program officers assessed charter applicants based on their "ongoing capacity for growth" *(Corrine, Program Officer, Support Foundation),* and CMOs with aggressive plans were favored. A CMO executive stated:

> Funders want to see growth. They are, by and large, much less interested in funding existing schools. They love the stories from the existing schools but where they feel like they're able to, where they feel like their dollars are having the greatest impact is when they know it's going to new schools. *(Lawrence, Executive, Creative CMO)*

The founder and CEO of *Sunshine* illustrated this sentiment by recounting:

> [I had dinner] with [*Frank, Program Officer, Windfall Foundation*] and he just sort of, pretty early in the conversation asks, "So how many schools are you guys doing?" I said, you know, "Only six." And he goes, "You need to do more. You need to do, you know, 15, 20, 25." … It wasn't a, *We're not going to fund you if you don't* but it was a *We need you to reach more kids and we need you to do more schools and create more touch points.* That's where he was coming from. *(Steven, Founder & CEO, Sunshine CMO)*

The amount of foundation dollars available for CMO scale was significant. In 2002, NewSchools Venture Fund announced a $40-million-dollar "Charter Accelerator Fund" to primarily support educational entrepreneurs establishing CMOs. Other funders, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Broad Foundation, followed suit. NSVF soon guided the charter-related investment portfolio of Gates, managing grantmaking and performing due diligence on potential CMO investments. By 2003, the Walton Family Foundation, one of the largest funders of standalone charter schools, began shifting its grantmaking to include CMOs. During the early years of the CMO, grants to CMOs represented an ever-growing share of overall charter school philanthropy while grants to other charter forms remained flat. During this period, we determined that CMOs received 90% of foundation funding to California charter schools. In the words of one informant:

> [By 2002 or 2003] there started being philanthropy for CMOs. So before, other cities asked me to create schools in their cities but I didn't have any support. Whereas now you can go to

> a NewSchools. You can go to a Gates. You can go to … various people and there's some money there to do this.… It didn't exist before. *(Antonio, Founder & Executive, Touchstone CMO)*

The rationale for the CMO form went beyond its perceived ability to achieve organization-level economies. As we describe above, although stand-alone schools continued to be formed locally around the country, the charter method of reform increasingly faced criticism. A paradigm of scale motivated and structured behavior of both charter leaders and their funders in relation to this criticism. Scale was widely understood to be a way charter reform could induce change in the broader public school system while maintaining quality control and fostering internal organizational learning across charter schools. The CMO, as a form designed to scale, benefited from the philanthropic resources directed to support this growth.

A Paradigm of Scale and the Mobilization of Human Capital

The paradigm of scale didn't simply open a channel of philanthropic resources. Charter leaders and foundation staff described the importance of reaching sufficient scale to build the capacity of their organization. One informant explained:

> Where scaling probably really had an impact is that [there exists a] level of support to the schools that just if we are "one-off" we just couldn't, we couldn't afford me. We couldn't afford *Kyle*, [our chief education officer]. We couldn't afford any of the people on this floor. *(Steven, Founder & CEO, Sunshine CMO)*

The founder and chief executive of *Talent CMO*, a long-time educator, stated: "Becoming a CMO has enabled us to bring in some really very, very, very helpful top-level personnel which helps the operation." Among the benefits of being a CMO, this informant specifically cited:

> Being able to hire key personnel that are helping all of the schools in a manner that is more sophisticated than I was able to do as just the founder and principal of individual schools…We brought in somebody who has great expertise with labor laws and, you know, she went on a big learning curve to learn the education world but did it very quickly… Another one is having a CFO and accounting, and that whole division has been wonderful. *(Esther, Founder & CEO, Talent CMO)*

Some foundations even hired management consulting firms to map out growth strategies and develop comprehensive business plans for current and prospective grantees. As one program officer of a major foundation reported:

> [We've] paid for a consultant to do some business planning with them and the result is a business plan that helps the organization figure out what its path can or cannot be. … The reason why we're doing a lot of these, what we, we call them engagements between the consultants and grantees or prospective grantees is that we do want decisions to be based on strategy, not simply opportunity. *(Theodore, Program Officer, Windfall Foundation)*

During this period, a handful of consulting firms developed expertise in the CMO subfield. Among the more prominent firms was Bridgespan, the nonprofit spin-off of Bain & Company, which, by the mid-2000s, produced business plans for a half dozen California CMOs and regularly counseled education program officers of the major foundations.

As the charter organizational form perceived to be the vehicle that could "get to scale" and have the greatest impact on public education, the CMO pulled in professionals with backgrounds and expertise in business (first) and education (second) to assume leadership roles. Some were brought on board through alternative channels such as the Broad Residency, a program of the Broad Foundation that recruits and trains management professionals from different sectors for leadership positions in education. In many cases, the target CMO executive recruit was a recent MBA graduate with an interest in public education reform. The influx of these professionals and the expertise they brought further legitimated the CMO form to stakeholders, funders, and constituents. It also ensured a cadre of advocates with connections to like-minded individuals situated in powerful political positions and with access to financial resources. In contrast, stand-alones and clusters generally did not have professionals with business backgrounds on staff other than bookkeepers.

In line with the business training they received, or at least the business ideology they embraced, many of the CMO executives we interviewed saw themselves as educational entrepreneurs. For example, soon after the founding of *Ovation CMO*, *Maria* was recruited to join the executive team as chief operating officer. *Maria* is a self-described "educational entrepreneur" with a professional background and interest in business and education. As the resident management expert, she was attracted to and identified closely with the entrepreneurial ambitions of *Ovation*, describing it as an "ideal job" because it was a "high growth, high impact" organization. The qualifications *Maria* brought to *Ovation* were not unique.

By 2008, this CMO employed four graduates of Stanford University's joint MBA/MA in Education program.

Job titles adopted from the corporate world (e.g., "chief operating officer") reflected and signaled the CMO's inclusion and embrace of managerial expertise. For instance, the job description and title for a position at *Sunshine CMO* posted during the 2006–07 school year suggests its efforts to incorporate entrepreneurial expertise into its executive team:

> Vice President of Strategic Growth. [*Sunshine CMO*] seeks a leader with a proven track record of success to develop and implement strategies to lead [our] expansion into cities across California and nationally. The VP of Strategic Growth will drive [*Sunshine's*] work to scale our small, high-achieving, college prep urban high schools and maximize our policy impact.… Strategic planning, systems development, major project management, marketing, negotiation, and growth organization experience are required for success in this role.

Virtually every CMO in our study had executive teams that included both managerial and educational credentials, often through the paired positions of a "chief executive officer" and a "chief instructional (or academic) officer." For example, to meet its ambitious growth and educational goals, *Visionary CMO* hired a former management consultant from Bain & Company to act as President and Chief Operating Officer alongside its founder, an intellectual leader of the charter school movement.

In sum, the paradigm of scale provided more than just financial resources to the CMO form. It also attracted human capital resources. CMOs offered promising careers for a growing cadre of young professionals for whom scale was a resonant ideal. Many of these professionals were self-described educational and social entrepreneurs who had cultivated expertise in business and education. In the words of one CMO leader:

> The landscape has gone, I think, from outrageous to ambitious in the eyes of the individuals who are looking at this work.… Now, I probably get six calls a year from individuals who say, "Wow. How crazy is it and why did you do it and would you do it again and what do you think about me thinking about doing that?" So the field is a different place. *(Phillip, Founder & CEO, Ovation CMO)*

Contrastive Framing of the CMO Form

Proponents often minimized the impact of the stand-alone as part of their efforts to frame the CMO to potential funders as the solution to the charter movement's central shortfalls. A pervasive strategy employed was to equate the CMO to Starbucks, noting that the rapidly expanding corporation had positively transformed its industry, and to equate the stand-alone to a local "mom and pop" coffee shop. The metaphor drove home to funders the idea that the CMO was the fast-growth, professionalized alternative that represented a "second phase" of the charter movement. By implicit contrast, the "mom and pop" label suggested that the stand-alone had limited reach, was managed by nonprofessionals, and was not designed for impact. This was understood to be a salient metaphor for funders: "No one talks about a boutique school. They want 1,000 Starbucks," remarked *Neil*, a prominent education leader.

Others engaged in promoting the CMO, but were also sympathetic to the alternative approach of the stand-alones. A prominent funder described the CMO and how it differs from the stand-alone by stating: "Think Starbucks and McDonald's. That's what [*Zenith CMO*] is like. They are the Starbucks now. They're not locally responsive" *(Johnny, Program Officer, Advantage Foundation).* The same informant later reflected on the CMO form's potential for "rigorous control" (in reference to *Breakthrough*, a well-known community organization planning to establish an affiliated CMO):

> They are now thinking of having a CMO for [*Breakthrough*] so that they can really franchise, they can really develop the model and then impose a standardization across these schools. So that's no longer about local "mom and pops" being very close. So that is very much the business difference of [CMOs]. They do develop a brand. They work to define the brand but then the brand drives the teacher hiring, their student recruitment, and their communications with parents. *(Johnny, Program Officer, Advantage Foundation)*

Similarly, a prominent leader explained the advantage of the CMO form relative to the stand-alone form this way: "We have a little more breathing room, not a lot, but there's much more breathing room than a 'mom and pop' that's trying to keep their head above water" *(Antonio, Founder & Executive, Touchstone CMO).* The informant went on to apologetically state, "And I guess I shouldn't call it 'mom and pop.' Let's call them start-ups. You know, stand-alone start-ups."

The leaders of non-CMO charter schools we spoke with recognized the growing preference for the Starbucks model of charters and the professionalized, high-growth system of schools it suggested. The downside of getting to scale was a common theme among these leaders. For example, the founder of an academically strong charter school remarked that the rush to scale comes from funders: "The number one thing they care about is the number, the number, the number. And that's the only way they see impact" (*Gloria, Founder, Rainbow Charter*). These leaders countered the Starbucks metaphor by calling out perceived shortfalls of the CMO form. *Gloria* did not want to "fall into the trap" of becoming a CMO because "most CMOs turn into school districts without geographic boundaries," thus repeating "all the problems" of public school districts. *Rhoda,* the director of a non-CMO cluster of charter schools stated that growth for her school was organic: "there was no intent at [our school's] inception to do anything more than serve the population of kids that we had identified, and then when the population grew, we said, *Okay. We can do this.*… But there hasn't been any empire building in this" (*Rhoda, Director, Galaxy Charter*).

Most of the framing and differentiation on the part of CMO leaders and supporters emphasized how they departed from traditional stand-alone charter schools. To a much lesser extent, proponents emphasized the CMO's nonprofit legal structure and mission to set it apart from the for-profit EMO, a form that lacked legitimacy in certain settings. For example, a CMO leader commented: "Most of the big organizations out there are like, you know, for-profits. So therefore they're automatically evil in the minds of some community organizations, whereas at least we're not-for-profit" *(Maria, Executive, Ovation CMO).* The lack of attention proponents paid to differentiating the CMO from the EMO form is unsurprising given the comparatively small subset of California charter students enrolled in an EMO-operated school. From 1999 to 2006, the portion of total non-virtual charter school enrollment in an EMO-operated school fell from 6.7% to 1.3%. While the share of charter students enrolled in stand-alone schools also decreased during this period—from 77.3% in 1999 to 62.8% in 2006—stand-alones remained the dominant charter form. In contrast, during this period the CMO portion of total charter enrollment increased from 0.7% to 12.6%. By the 2006–07 school year, 24,481 students were enrolled in a CMO-run school.

Charters that were part of a loosely affiliated "cluster" of schools constituted a growing sector during our focal period. The cluster form increased its portion of total nonvirtual charter school enrollment from 13.8% in 1999 to 20.8% in 2006. Clustered charters shared ties that created an affiliation, common identity, or a common funding source. However, despite its resemblance, the cluster form accrued neither the symbolic nor material benefits accorded to the CMO.

Our informants made little effort to contrast the CMO from clusters that, as we described above, did not possess an overt goal to scale as a means of systemic change. With few exceptions, growth of schools within clusters tended to be slow and organic rather than the result of some defining element of the organization's vision or identity at its founding. Like stand-alones, the majority of clusters were not led by professional managers but instead by educators or community or social service workers who had been involved in founding the original school. In addition, charter schools within clusters tended to be funded by and accountable to their local community rather than by high-engagement foundations. Because of these similarities, we surmise that for CMO leaders and funders, clusters were indistinguishable from stand-alones.

The contrastive framing of the CMO form was necessary precisely because the early rhetoric of the charter school movement emphasized decentralization as a key attribute. The paradigm of scale that was natural for high-engagement philanthropists and educational entrepreneurs ran contrary to the arguments of stand-alone charter school proponents (see Billig, 1996). While the former understood scale (and the centralization it entails) as a means to attain quality, efficiency, and impact, the latter understood decentralization as enabling local school communities to better address the needs of their students.

DISCUSSION

To appreciate the central role of ideas in understanding policy change, we can turn to John Maynard Keynes, who famously points out in *The General Theory* that "the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else" (1936, p. 383). We similarly maintain that ideas have impacted the trajectory of education reform movements.

We live in an era when education is focused on "the basics." States rely on standardized tests of math and reading to assess performance, and many states have adopted a common core of standards. The focus is on quantifiable outputs. The assumption is that the most efficient and effective functional solution will prevail. Our study illuminates a complementary set of processes that underlie education reform efforts. We explain how the idea of scale intersected with political opportunities and human and financial resources in the early diffusion of the CMO form. The late 1990s were characterized by increasing ideological acceptance of neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism in education. During this period, high-engagement philanthropists and educational entrepreneurs set their sights on the charter school method of reform. Alongside rapid growth, charter proponents grew increasingly aware of accountability and performance shortfalls. The CMO emerged from within this context as a perceived solution.

The early diffusion of the CMO form was facilitated by ideas in both the background and foreground of debate that emphasized the value of "getting to scale." A paradigm of scale motivated and structured behavior of charter leaders and high-engagement philanthropists. These actors argued that growth of the charter school movement would be better served through CMOs scaling up rather than the arbitrary and uncontrolled establishment of new stand-alone schools ("letting a thousand flowers bloom"), or, for that matter, growth through the politically contentious for-profit EMO. The CMO was an organizational form that imposed high levels of consistency and control across its charter schools, it was a form perceived to facilitate internal organizational learning, and, most importantly, it was widely understood as a form primed to "tip" the traditional public school system and induce systemic change while maintaining quality.

As a result, CMOs received substantial philanthropic support, particularly from high-engagement foundations. Our analysis of education grantmaking determined that by 2005, California CMOs were receiving over 90% of Foundation Center–tracked grant dollars devoted to the charter field, despite accounting for just over 11% of the total charter school enrollment in the state. Alongside the channeling of philanthropic funds, CMOs were an attractive career option for new professionals. Beginning with Aspire's founders and early executives, the CMO attracted individuals with interest and experience in entrepreneurial ventures in education, many of whom were brought on board through alternative channels. The influx of these individuals to the charter field created an emergent class of alternative educational professionals with strong links to the dominant business community and elites in multiple circles. In turn, these professionals served as a corps of advocates for the CMO form with connections to like-minded individuals situated in powerful political positions and with access to financial resources.

Proponents drew upon the prevailing paradigm of scale, and strategically constructed frames designed to contrast the CMO from other charter organizational forms. The CMO was framed as an organizational solution to the perceived problems of the charter movement, emphasizing its capacity to scale as a means of distinguishing it most conspicuously from "mom and pop" stand-alones. Stand-alones were described and understood as charter forms lacking the structure and managerial expertise that could create systemic change. These framing efforts provided continual reinforcement of the CMO form's perceived potential to charter funders, new professionals, and other actors.

California, with its prevalence of entrepreneurs originating from the technology industry, is perhaps particularly fertile ground for the diffusion of the CMO. In fact, in the years following our focal period, it has become apparent that the CMO form has flourished in a handful of states, but not all. Political will, philanthropic context, and charter policies and regulations vary by state. We therefore do not expect that other states mirror California with regard to the CMO form's growth relative to other charter forms. However, we do expect that background and foreground ideas associated with scale guide and constrain proponents, funders, new professionals, and other stakeholders in advancing the CMO form, even if, for example, stakeholder influence and the ethos of entrepreneurialism were weaker (or stronger) than in California.

Our study covers the early diffusion of the CMO form, from 1999 to 2006. At the conclusion of our period of analysis, the CMO was positioned as the fastest growing charter organizational form. Further work is needed to ascertain whether the CMO will become increasingly ubiquitous, whether it will level off, whether it has or will become institutionalized, or whether it is a fast growing fad that will eventually fade away (Colyvas & Jonsson, 2011). While we do not know the long-term trajectory of the movement, in more recent years, there have been signs suggesting a slowdown in the rate of growth of the CMO (Miron & Gulosino, 2013). This may be due to at least three factors. First, the recent economic downturn reduced the base of philanthropic capital available to fuel the expansion of CMOs. Second, some CMOs have stumbled in their efforts to grow rapidly while creating and maintaining strong educational programs. Some of these CMOs have intentionally slowed their growth to focus on strengthening existing schools. Third, in urban regions such as Los Angeles, a shortage of potential school sites limited growth and, in some cases, created competition among charter operators for scarce buildings (Meyerson, Berger, & Quinn, 2010). However, we do not see the slowdown as evidence that the form has suffered a blow to its legitimacy or lost its appeal to elites who supported its expansion. Moreover, we do not believe that our theoretical account of the growth of the CMO during the earlier part of the decade is challenged by current trends. Rather, in the same way that the economic conditions of the late 1990s opened the floodgates of philanthropic funding in the charter school sector, conditions in recent years may have subsequently restricted the flow.

The study contains a number of more general theoretical and practical implications. First, this analysis adds to a diverse body of research that challenges rational accounts of educational reform processes. We provide evidence that the diffusion of a new organizational form in education does not depend strictly on its utility. New organizational forms that challenge established institutional arrangements in education are comparable to social movements. Like social movements, the diffusion of new educational forms depend on the political, cultural, and material conditions surrounding the movement, including the structure of political opportunities, the availability of resources, and ideas, including deeply embedded paradigms and salient mobilizing frames. (We do not intend to suggest that certain expressed ideas are not used to mask particular underlying motivations. Certain interests may be more or less salient, and taken as more or less reasonable and appropriate, depending on the audience.)

Second, the strategic deployment of power played a central role in the success of the early diffusion of the CMO. Our case reveals how ideas of scale developed alongside the involvement and sponsorship of influential philanthropic stakeholders. These actors mobilized resources and other forms of support prior to conclusive evidence of the efficacy of their preferred innovation—the CMO. As such, our case contributes to recent scholarship in organizational sociology that examines the entrepreneurial roles elite actors play in legitimating and diffusing institutional innovations (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009). Philanthropic stakeholders not only furnish resources, they possess the cultural influence to legitimate frames that resonate with key stakeholders, which in turn garners additional support. Understanding these processes can deepen our understanding of the role of private philanthropy in public education (Hess, 2005; Quinn et al., 2014; Reckhow, 2013; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014).

Finally, the influence of CMOs on the charter movement is still unfolding, but a few trends are noteworthy. The charter school method of reform was introduced ostensibly to liberate educators from the restrictions of bureaucratic regulations and to enable schools to reflect the values and needs of local populations. With autonomy and decentralized control, reformers hoped that teachers would be free to innovate in curriculum and pedagogy and to more closely reflect the local communities they were founded to serve. From the earliest days of the movement, proponents argued that charters, as locally controlled schools freed from onerous regulations, could explore innovative teaching methods, organizational designs, and human resource and management practices that regular public schools were unable to adopt.

Early interest in charter schools notwithstanding, the CMO emerged amid three perceived problems plaguing the movement—inconsistent educational quality, operational inefficiencies, and lack of systemic impact. To achieve consistency, efficiency, and scale, CMOs centralize various educational, administrative, and cultural elements. In other words, the organizing principles of the CMO diverge in meaningful ways from the principles of deregulation and decentralization espoused by proponents of local charter schools. Given the relative youth and rapid adoption of the CMO form, we cannot yet determine its effects on resource allocation within the broader charter school movement. Data reviewed earlier on foundation spending indicate higher levels of funding for CMOs, leaving fewer resources available to other charter schools, many of which depend on private funding to supplement government support.

Additionally, CMOs receive a large proportion of their funding from high-engagement foundations, which are more likely to hold grantees accountable to measurable performance metrics than other types of funders, subjecting CMOs to an additional level of accountability beyond federal and state standards (Frumkin, 2003; Scott, 2009). For CMOs, these metrics of accountability have included specific growth targets, both at the school and pupil levels. As the CMO form continues to gain legitimacy, a larger proportion of educational reformers may become concerned about the perceived limited impact of stand-alone charter schools and may shift their political support to CMO-run schools.

Our detailed analysis illuminates how ideas play a central role in the diffusion of an organizational form. This general insight is not new (see Meyer & Rowan, 1977). However, in the current education landscape of standards and assessments, notions of utility and efficiency dominate policy conversations. We balance this attention by providing a contemporary application of the role of ideas. Early involvement and sponsorship by CMO proponents and other stakeholders mobilized support and resources prior to conclusive evidence of the efficacy of their preferred innovation. As such, this study provides evidence that suggests early diffusion of new organizational forms in education is shaped by ideas—both paradigms in the background and frames in the foreground—of proponents, funders, and other stakeholders, in combination with political opportunities and available financial and human resources. This perspective and approach emphasizing the roles played by ideas, opportunities, and resources aims to provide insight to other scholars analyzing current and past efforts at educational reform.

Furthermore, our analysis illuminates *the manner in which* different ideas influence institutional change. It is commonly held in studies of policy processes that the likelihood of significant change increases when friction is present among multiple ideas and institutions (Lieberman, 2002). In the case of the charter school movement and the rise of the CMO as a new organizational form, we find alignment between ideas framed by CMO proponents and the dominant paradigms of neoliberal schooling and education entrepreneurialism. The tension that exists in this case is between the varied ways in which differentially powered actors utilize the charter school as an organizational form. The ideas that fueled the creation of charter schools revolved around the need to be locally responsive, thereby necessitating lower regulation and a decentralized, relatively flexible organizational vehicle. What we find in the rise of the CMO is a process in which the charter school vehicle was decoupled from original ideas about local control, and therefore made available to serve a different (and in some instances contradictory) set of ideas around "getting to scale" and "tipping the system." The CMO form benefited from and was advanced by these ideas. We suggest that as the CMO form diffused, it altered the set of ideals that constitute the charter school movement by displacing ideas about school-level autonomy and decentralization in favor of ideas about scale.

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NOTES

1. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.
2. NewSchools Venture Fund (NSVF) is a public charity rather than a private foundation, a distinction in the tax code that relaxes restrictions on lobbying and some other organizational features. As a regranting intermediary, NSVF raises funds from foundations and then makes grants to other organizations. NSVF's core functions—making grants, convening grantees, and supporting portfolio organizations—closely resembles those of private foundations supporting charter schools. Therefore, for the purpose of our analysis and in the remainder of the text, we do not distinguish between NSVF and private foundations. We believe that NSVF was the only regranting intermediary organization providing charter school funding in California during our focal period.
3. In 1992, California became the second state to pass a charter school law. Originally, the law limited the total number of charters statewide to 100. The law was amended in 1998 to allow a maximum of 250 charter schools, with an additional 100 schools each year thereafter. This in effect eliminated the cap as far fewer than 100 charter schools are established each year (California Education Code §47602).

APPENDIX A

Sample questions form interview protocols

CMO Founders and Executives

- Which elements of the charter schools your CMO manages are standardized? Which elements are determined locally?
- How important is the development of a replicable model that can be shared with others?
- Is a scalable program something that your funders are specifically looking for? (What would be the impact to funding if your CMO didn't have any intention to expand?)
- Which foundations (or major donors) are focusing on scalability as a goal or criterion of value for social innovation projects?
- What are the challenges in developing a scalable program that remains locally responsive?
- What does scaling do for your organization? (i.e., How does scaling relate to your organization's efficiency, accountability, overall impact, ability to tap into knowledge etc.?)
- What measures do you use to gauge the impact your CMO is making? How do you define success for the organization? [The measurable and immeasurable]
- What areas/functions of the organization has efficiency been a concern/focus?
- How critical is the CMO brand to the success of its charter schools?

CMO Funders and Philanthropists

- Can you articulate the differences between expanding the impact of a social organization and producing a replicable model?
- Do you see any competing dynamics between developing a program that best responds to local needs versus one that can be expanded broadly? Examples/specifics
- When considering candidates for your funding portfolio, how important is the organization's potential capacity to build to scale?
- How important is scalability as a metric in the broader philanthropic field?

- How does scalability apply to the operation of charter schools? Are charter schools particularly subject to pressure to scale? If so, why?
- How do you measure or gauge the impact of CMOs in general? Is their ability to scale operations a metric in this evaluation process?
- What are some of the organizational effects that the charter schools that you fund have experienced as a result of scaling their enterprises?
- What are some of the organizational effects that the CMOs that you fund have experienced as a result of scaling their enterprises?
- What are some of the challenges faced in terms of maintaining the schools' mission and local context given scaling?
- What CMOs have had the greatest success with scaling charter schools, and what methods or structures have they employed?

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RAND QUINN is an assistant professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania. His research interests include the origins and political consequences of private sector engagement in public education, the politics of race and ethnicity in urban school reform, and the impact of community based institutions, organizations, and action in education. Recent publications include “Beyond grantmaking: Philanthropic foundations as agents of change and institutional entrepreneurs” (with Megan Tompkins-Stange and Debra Meyerson) published in *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, “Did Pennsylvania’s Act 61 increase education spending or provide tax relief?” (with Matthew Steinberg, Daniel Kreisman, and Cameron Anglum) published in *National Tax Journal*, and “Teacher activist organizations and the development of professional agency” (with Nicole Carl) published in *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*.

CARRIE R. OELBERGER is an assistant professor of management at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs. She studies how nonprofit organizations influence the private lives of their staff and how private interests shape nonprofit organizations and fields. She is currently examining how employees navigate careers in deeply meaningful work settings that compromise meaningful private lives, as well as studying how philanthropy shapes social movements and organizational fields. She received her PhD in organization studies from Stanford University.

DEBRA MEYERSON is a consulting professor of organizational behavior at the Stanford University Graduate School of Education (GSE) and a faculty research fellow at Stanford’s Clayman Institute for Gender Research. Prior to surviving a severe stroke in 2010, she was an associate professor at GSE and (by courtesy) the Stanford Graduate School of Business (GSB). She was faculty co-founder of the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society (PACS) and taught courses at the GSE and GSB on organizing for diversity, the leadership of social change, and educational and social entrepreneurship. Debra is the author of two books and more than 50 articles and chapters in academic and popular publications. Her books include *Tempered Radicals: How Everyday Leaders Inspire Change at Work* (HBS Press, 2001), which examines processes by which people advance controversial change from within organizations and leadership practices that foster grass-roots activism, and *Preparing Principals for a Changing World* (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe and Orr, Jossey-Bass, 2010). She has also examined issues around the scaling of charter schools and other non-profit organizations, and the role of philanthropic organizations in shaping such efforts. Her current priority is writing a book, tentatively titled *Identity Theft: Recovery, Renewal and Discovery after Stroke*. Using her own journey through stroke recovery, as well as interviews with more than two dozen other stroke survivors, she is now exploring identity through a different lens.