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“Doing What it Takes to Keep the School Open”: The Philanthropic Networks of Progressive Charter Schools

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Abstract: Researchers have demonstrated how venture philanthropic networks advance the growth of charter schools underpinned by market tenets. However, little remains known about how progressive charter schools mobilize financial support when most funding from philanthropic networks flows to market-oriented charters. This qualitative study examines how three progressive charter schools in New York City mobilized financial support, the extent to which charters’ financial supporters operated in a networked context, and the extent to which charters’ resource mobilization activities reflected their founding progressive tenets. Findings reveal that the focal charters incorporated market logic when cultivating financial support networks. In doing so, schools endeavored to secure their own resource advantages while reinforcing resource inequities across New York City’s unequal educational landscape, hence undermining the equity and community responsibility dimensions of their progressive missions.

Keywords: charter schools; philanthropy; social network analysis

“Hacer lo que sea necesario para mantener la escuela abierta”: Las redes filantrópicas de las escuelas autónomas progresistas

Resumen: Los investigadores han demostrado cómo las redes filantrópicas de riesgo promueven el crecimiento de las escuelas autónomas respaldadas por los principios del mercado. Sin embargo, se sabe poco sobre cómo las escuelas autónomas progresistas movilizan el apoyo financiero cuando la mayor parte de los fondos de las redes filantrópicas se destina a las escuelas autónomas orientadas a los mercados. Este estudio cualitativo examina cómo tres escuelas autónomas progresistas en la ciudad de Nueva York movilizaron apoyo financiero, hasta qué punto los patrocinadores financieros de las escuelas autónomas operaron en un contexto en red y hasta qué punto las actividades de movilización de recursos de las escuelas autónomas reflejaron sus principios progresistas fundacionales. Los resultados revelan que las cartas focales incorporaron la lógica del mercado al cultivar redes de apoyo financiero. Al hacerlo, las escuelas se esforzaron por asegurar sus propias ventajas de recursos al tiempo que reforzaban las desigualdades de recursos en el desigual panorama educativo de la ciudad de Nueva York, lo que socavaba las dimensiones de equidad y responsabilidad comunitaria de sus misiones progresistas.

Palabras-clave: escuelas charter; filantropía; análisis de redes sociales

“Fazendo o que é necessário para manter a escola aberta”: As redes filantrópicas de escolas charter progressivas

Resumo: Pesquisadores demonstraram como as redes filantrópicas de risco promovem o crescimento das escolas charter sustentadas por princípios de mercado. No entanto, pouco se sabe sobre como as escolas charter progressistas mobilizam apoio financeiro quando a maior parte do financiamento de redes filantrópicas vai para charters orientadas para os mercados. Este estudo qualitativo examina como três escolas charter progressivas na cidade de Nova York mobilizaram apoio financeiro, até que ponto os patrocinadores financeiros das charters operaram em um contexto de rede e até que ponto as atividades de mobilização de recursos das charters refletiram seus princípios progressivos de fundação. Os resultados revelam que as cartas focais incorporaram a lógica do mercado ao cultivar redes de apoio financeiro. Ao fazer isso, as escolas se esforçaram para garantir suas próprias vantagens de recursos enquanto reforçavam as desigualdades de recursos em todo o cenário educacional desigual da cidade de Nova York, minando, portanto, as dimensões de equidade e responsabilidade comunitária de suas missões progressivas.

Palavras-chave: escolas charter; filantropia; análise de rede social

“Doing What It Takes to Keep the School Open”: The Philanthropic Networks of Progressive Charter Schools

The advocacy and political leadership of the charter movement has been fed by money that is decidedly not progressive and has imperiled charters’ legacy. There is a very good progressive case to be made for charter schools, but the movement must first rediscover its democratic, educator-empowered roots and take a more humble approach to changing the world. (Zimmerman, 2018)

These words appeared in a November 2018 letter to the editorial board of *The New York Times*. Its author was Steve Zimmerman, director of the nascent Coalition of Public Independent Charter Schools (CPICS). CPICS grew from a symposium Zimmerman helped to organize in October 2017, that had leaders from nearly 200 charter schools in attendance. These leaders shared concerns that existing charter school advocacy organizations centered on expanding the charter sector through the charter management organization (CMO) model and, in turn, paid little attention to charters unaffiliated with CMOs. As Zimmerman explained shortly following the symposium, charter advocates such as the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools “can’t really represent the real interests of independent charter schools because their funders really believe in the network model” (Barnum, 2017, para. 7).

Researchers have similarly pointed to the outsize financial and political influence of self-identified “venture philanthropists” on the direction of the charter school movement (Scott, 2009). Venture philanthropists subscribe to a narrative that frames traditional public schools as failing and advances market mechanisms, such as choice and competition, as ideal vehicles for improving school quality and student achievement (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962; Hill, Pierce, & Guthrie, 1997). They include wealthy individuals, such as Michael Bloomberg and Laurene Powell Jobs; and foundations, such as the Gates, Broad, and Walton Foundations, that operate in coordinated networks to expand the number of charter schools (Au & Ferrare, 2014; Ferrare & Setari, 2018; Quinn, Oelberger, & Meyerson, 2016; Reckhow, 2013; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Scott, 2009; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). Like venture capitalists in the private sector, venture philanthropists invest in charters that promise high returns in the form of student achievement and sector growth (Scott, 2009). Moreover, these networks not only financially support charter schools directly, but also engage politically in shaping the policy and institutional environments surrounding charters. For instance, philanthropists financially support advocacy organizations promoting charter-friendly policies (DeBray, Scott, Lubienski, & Jabbar, 2014; Scott, 2009) and the campaigns of school board candidates who promise to expand charters (Henig, Jacobsen, & Reckhow, 2019). Venture philanthropic networks also financially support organizations that provide charter school seed funding, such as the Charter School Growth Fund (Scott, 2009); provide human capital support to charter schools, such as Teach For America (TFA; Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014); and promote and disseminate research evidence that casts charter schools favorably (DeBray et al., 2014; Scott & Jabbar, 2014). To illustrate how they operate in a network, foundations leverage their collective capacity by supporting the same organizations, a pattern Reckhow and Snyder (2014) term “convergent grant-making” (p. 191).

However, since the inception of the charter school movement in the early 1990s, charters have had a range of political, ideological, and philosophical underpinnings. In addition to market tenets, some charters are informed by the progressive goals of advancing equitable opportunity and access for poor communities and communities of color long underserved by the traditional public school system. Communities leveraged the flexibility and autonomy afforded by the charter model to

create ethnocentric charter schools (Fox & Buchanan, 2014; Wilson, 2016) and charters serving the educational needs of poor or immigrant families or those speaking languages other than English (Rofes & Stulberg, 2004). Moreover, for their progressive advocates, charters were intended to animate local participatory democracy, enabling teachers, families, and other stakeholders to create schools that reflected local needs and preferences (Budde, 1988). Yet over the years, charter school policies and legislation have been more deeply informed by market than progressive tenets and practices (Knight Abowitz & Karaba, 2010; Wells, 2002), thanks largely to politically influential venture philanthropic networks animated by market logic (Reckhow, 2013; Scott, 2009).

Although charter school advocates argue that charters can “do more with less” (e.g., DeAngelis & DeGrow, 2018), scholars have demonstrated that charters, regardless of political and pedagogical orientation or organizational type, must secure financial, organizational, and human resources from private sources given their autonomy from district offices, which provide critical financial, administrative, and human capital support to traditional public schools (Ascher et al., 2001; Huerta & d’Entremont, 2010; Wohlstetter et al., 2004). In addition, in light of ongoing state disinvestment in public education (Leachman, Masterson, & Figueroa, 2017), traditional public and charter schools alike face growing resource constraints. Hence, they increasingly turn to outside sources of support, from foundations (Reckhow, 2013; Scott, 2009) to parent fundraisers (Posey-Maddox, 2016), and engage in strategic marketing and branding efforts to attract donors (DiMartino & Jessen, 2018). Scholars have demonstrated how CMOs and other charters underpinned by market tenets largely meet their resource needs through their ties with venture philanthropic networks. However, little remains known about how progressive charters, such as those affiliated with CPICS, mobilize financial support when the majority of funding from venture philanthropic networks flows to market-oriented charters, such as CMOs, and to policies promoting CMO growth.

This qualitative study is an investigation of which individuals and organizations lent financial support to three progressive charter schools in New York City, Empire, Hudson, and Liberty Charter Schools.¹ Although definitions of progressive education have evolved and been contested over time (e.g., Alridge, 2007; Cremin, 1961; Dewey, 1900; Forman, 2005; Mirel, 1990; Semel, 1999), for this study, I define progressive education as incorporating (a) political commitments to advancing equitable and democratic schooling for historically underserved communities, and (b) pedagogical practices informed by these political orientations. I examined how progressive charters mobilized financial support, the extent to which financial supporters operated in a networked context, and the extent to which charters’ resource mobilization activities reflected their founding progressive tenets. This study is particularly timely amid critiques, including from charter advocates, of President Trump’s and Education Secretary DeVos’s enthusiasm for free-market educational initiatives (e.g., Resmovits, 2017; Richmond, 2017), and burgeoning political support for progressive education reforms (Kamenetz, 2018).

Findings reveal that the focal charter schools mobilized local support networks, in contrast to CMOs’ networks of nationally prominent foundations and philanthropists. Simultaneously, schools incorporated market logic when cultivating financial support networks. These approaches included leveraging the affluent networks of board trustees, teachers, school leaders, and families. In doing so, schools endeavored to secure their own resource advantages while reinforcing resource inequities across New York City’s unequal educational landscape, hence undermining the equity and community responsibility dimensions of their progressive missions. In turn, schools exhibited “mission drift,” departing from their progressive commitments and instead cultivating support

¹ I use pseudonyms to protect the identities of the schools and all interview informants.

networks that would further their own resource needs in the competitive market environment (Ebrahim, Battilana, & Mair, 2014).

Following this introduction, I review the conceptual and empirical scholarship on philanthropic networks and charter school expansion. Next, I describe the research design, methods of data collection and analysis, and focal cases. I then discuss the findings and their significance. I conclude with implications for research, policy, and practice.

The Role of Philanthropy in Charter School Policy and Advocacy Networks

Scholars have conceptualized education policy as increasingly occurring within a networked context, wherein hierarchical, bureaucratic government systems are restructured to accommodate networks of unelected actors from the private and nonprofit sectors, including philanthropists, business elites, and think tank researchers (Ball, 2008). In addition to expanding the arena of political actors, Ball argues that policy networks “validate new policy discourses, and enable new forms of policy influence and enactment, and, in some respects, disable or disenfranchise or circumvent some of the established policy actors and agencies” (p. 748). In particular, policy networks advance a discourse rooted in neoliberal ideology, which assumes that the public sector is inefficient and that improving government requires incorporating practices from the private sector, such as market accountability and managerial governance (Harvey, 2005). To do so, network actors employ various discursive and political techniques, including framing market-based reforms as “commonsense” (Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2011), engaging in advocacy and policymaking activities promoting such reforms (Au & Ferrare, 2014; McGuinn, 2012; Reckhow, 2013; Scott, 2009) and working to dismantle the influence of longer-established political actors, such as teachers’ unions (Lipman, 2011).

Philanthropists occupy prominent roles in such networks. Some scholars point out that philanthropists have the potential to stimulate much-needed education reforms by funding new ideas, practices, and routines (e.g., Hess, 2005). Yet others highlight how philanthropists generally advance reforms rooted in neoliberal or conservative ideology. For example, philanthropists provide critical financial and political resources to ideologically conservative think tanks, enabling them to promote market-based reform ideas in the political and public spheres (Lubienski, Brewer, & La Londe, 2016). The strategic linkage between philanthropists and think tanks dates to the 1970s, when funding from conservative foundations propelled the work of think tanks such as the Cato Institute and Manhattan Institute, which advanced a public discourse that framed social welfare policies as encouraging dependence on the government and hence stifling economic growth (Rich, 2001). Describing more contemporary patterns, Scott and Jabbar (2014) argue that foundations operate as “hubs” within neoliberal policy and advocacy networks, funding organizations advancing market-based reforms; as well as “spokes,” mobilizing the strategic political activities of such organizations.

To illustrate the influential role of foundations in networks promoting charter schools as a preferred market-based initiative, researchers have employed social network analysis to map venture philanthropists’ funding patterns. This work illustrates the prevalence of convergent grant-making (Reckhow & Snyder, 2014), wherein foundations financially support the same charter organizations, particularly CMOs (Ferrare & Setari, 2018; Reckhow, 2013). Because CMOs are designed to scale up rapidly, philanthropists view this charter model as an ideal means of infusing market-based choice and competition into the educational arena (Quinn et al., 2016). Related research captures how many venture philanthropists fund the same charter school support organizations. For example, the Broad, Fisher, Gates, and Walton Foundations are among the largest financial contributors to TFA

and the Relay Graduate School of Education, alternative teacher certification programs that place many of their recruits in charters and engage in the policy arena to advocate for charter expansion and other market-based reforms (Kretchmar et al., 2014). Similarly, the New Schools Venture Fund (NSVF), a venture philanthropy firm, has invested heavily in numerous CMOs and alternative teacher preparation programs, including TFA and Relay (Zeichner & Peña-Sandoval, 2015). Examining start-up charters unaffiliated with CMOs, Scott and Holme (2002) highlight how such schools are at a robust resource advantage when they enjoy access to affluent social networks. This pattern in turn exacerbates inequities between charters in wealthy and poor communities.

Scholars have documented how the financial and political activities of charter school advocacy networks are intertwined: foundations are critical not only to funding charter schools and charter support organizations, but also to influencing the direction of charter school policy. For example, funding from major foundations has been key to the operations of national and state-level political organizations, such as Democrats for Education Reform, 50CAN, and the California Charter Schools Association, that advocate for charter school expansion (McGuinn, 2012; Scott, 2009). On the local level, in urban school districts such as New Orleans and Chicago, foundations have worked in tandem with policymakers and education reformers to restructure public school systems in ways that facilitate charter school expansion (Buras, 2011; DeBray et al., 2014; Lipman, 2011). Finally, in a stark illustration of the networked environment of charter school philanthropy, advocacy, and policy, many individuals with ties to charter funding and advocacy organizations later assumed roles in education policymaking. These include NSVF Chief Operating Officer Joanne Weiss, who served as Arne Duncan's Chief of Staff, and Louisiana State Superintendent John White, an alumnus of TFA and the Broad Foundation's education leadership program (Kretchmar et al., 2014; Mehta & Teles, 2011).

Scholars have critiqued the mechanics of charter school policy and advocacy networks as serving private and ideological interests rather than equitable education. As Ball (2008) describes, such networks "are both routes of influence and access for business organizations and businesspeople and new ways of realizing, disseminating, and enacting policy" (p. 758). Likewise, a body of critical scholarship argues that such networks stand to profit when school systems are restructured to accommodate charters and other market-based reforms (Buras, 2011; Kretchmar et al., 2014). Much of this work highlights the racial dynamics inherent in such processes, as mostly white entrepreneurs and philanthropists experiment with expanding charters and other market reforms in communities of color without involving local stakeholders (Buras, 2011; Lipman, 2011; Scott, 2011). Moreover, these reformers often rhetorically connect charter schools and other neoliberal reforms to the Civil Rights Movement while remaining silent on how these initiatives have exacerbated racial segregation and inequity (Scott, 2013). Finally, scholars critique the research brokerage activities of foundations, think tanks, and other intermediary organizations as advancing ideologically-aligned research (Lubienski et al., 2011) and framing think tank research as credible sources of evidence (Haas, 2007; Rich, 2001).

Examining Support for Progressive Charter Schooling

Research documents how neoliberal policy and advocacy networks, with foundations at their center, are generally more resourced and politically influential relative to those promoting progressive policies to expand state spending on social welfare, education, and other public goods and services (Anderson, De La Cruz, & López, 2017; Rich, 2001). Against this backdrop, progressive charter schools have often struggled to garner financial and political support (Quinn et al., 2016). Although the charter school movement has been an "ideologically big tent" since its inception, underpinned by both neoliberal and progressive tenets, neoliberal advocates have been

disproportionately active and influential in shaping charter school law and policy, overshadowing charter schools' progressive possibilities (Knight Abowitz & Karaba, 2010, p. 10; Wells, 2002). In turn, some progressive charters eventually adjust or abandon their founding progressive missions in order to attract funding and political support (Huerta & d'Entremont, 2010; White, 2018).

However, recent shifts in the political and ideological terrain suggest that there is emerging support for a progressive education policy agenda that would broaden public investment in schools serving minoritized communities and expand equitable educational opportunities and access for poor students and students of color. For instance, in New York City, the context of this study, there has been growing public and political attention on the role of market-based school choice, including charter schools, in perpetuating racial segregation (Mader, Hemphill, & Abbas, 2018; New York Appleseed, 2013, 2014; Roda, 2018). In turn, some local school choice initiatives have been restructured to prioritize racial and socioeconomic integration and equitable resource distribution (Shapiro, 2018). On the state level, during the November 2018 midterm election, six progressive senate candidates unseated incumbent members of the Independent Democratic Conference, a breakaway group of Democratic senators who had been caucusing with senate Republicans in supporting charter schools and other market-based reforms (Jacobs, 2018). These patterns mirror national trends: when teachers' unions across the country went on strike, calling for greater investment in public education and, in some cases, increased accountability for charter schools, polls demonstrated that a majority of Americans supported teachers' demands (Kamenetz, 2018). Given growing support for a progressive education agenda, the time is ripe to examine how progressive charters mobilize financial support and the extent to which progressive charters' supporters operate in a unified network.

Research Design and Methodology

I employed comparative qualitative case study design (Yin, 2009) to examine which individuals and organizations financially support three progressive charter schools in New York City. Case study design is well-suited to studying complex phenomena that have not yet been fully conceptualized, such as financial support networks for progressive charter schools. Further, case study design allowed me to investigate, in depth, the phenomenon of interest within its "real life" context, and was especially appropriate given my descriptive and explanatory research questions (Yin, 2009), which were as follows:

1. How did progressive charter schools in New York City mobilize financial support?
2. To what extent did progressive charter schools' financial supporters operate in a networked context?
3. To what extent did progressive charter schools' approaches to mobilizing financial support reflect their founding progressive missions?

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected as part of a larger project focused on the political advocacy activities and organizational survival among progressive charter schools. For this study, data sources included semi-structured interviews ($n=44$) (Patton, 2001) conducted over 13 months, between May 2017 and June 2018. I interviewed 11 of these individuals twice, once in fall 2017, and again in spring 2018. I conducted interviews with charter school leaders and board members from each of the focal schools. During interviews, I asked respondents questions regarding the composition of their financial and political support networks. Based on who school leaders and board members named as key supporters (e.g., funders, education reformers, and advocacy organization staff), I contacted these individuals and invited them to be interviewed, as well. Each interview lasted approximately 1

hour, and, with permission, was audio recorded. All recorded interviews were transcribed. If interview participants did not consent to be audio recorded, I took written notes during our meeting.

I supplemented interview data with observations of charter school board trustee meetings held between September 2017 and June 2018 to capture conversations among schools' governing boards related to garnering political or financial support. I also observed events organized by charter advocacy organizations. In total, I conducted approximately 50 hours of observations. During observations, I took jotted notes with low levels of inference. I expanded these jottings into written field notes within 24 hours (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Finally, I collected documents as additional evidence of schools' efforts to mobilize support networks (Bowen, 2009). These included charter application and renewal documents, IRS 990 forms, internal financial documents, online and print fundraising appeals, and board meeting agendas and minutes.

Data were qualitatively coded using the NVivo software package, employing both deductive and inductive codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Deductive codes were developed from key concepts related to philanthropic and policy networks in education, and included "partnership-advocacy organization" and "partnership-foundation." Inductive codes were empirically grounded in the data. These codes emerged as I read through interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents and began to identify themes and concepts not captured by my conceptual approach. For example, as I recognized that the focal schools' network ties and resource mobilization efforts were more local in nature, I began to code for "community partnerships," "community engagement," "fundraising-direct appeals," and "fundraising-events." As I recognized patterns while coding, I wrote analytic memos to capture emerging patterns and themes (Miles et al., 2014).

The New York City Context

Neoliberal policy and philanthropic networks have actively shaped charter school policy in New York City since the early 2000s. Central to these networks was businessman Michael Bloomberg, who began his 12-year tenure as Mayor of New York City in 2002, 4 years after the enactment of New York State's Charter Schools Act. Charter schools were a key aspect of Bloomberg's education reform agenda, which was oriented around market-based reforms, such as shuttering underperforming schools and expanding school choice and privatization (Aggarwal & Mayorga, 2016; DiMartino & Scott, 2012; Lewis, 2013). In addition to receiving robust political support from City Hall, New York City charters, particularly CMOs, have attracted millions of dollars in philanthropic support from major foundations, as well as from hedge fund managers who made their fortunes on Manhattan's Wall Street (Reckhow, 2013; Scott, 2009). Foundations and hedge fund managers have also funded organizations lending political and human capital support to New York City charters. These include charter advocacy organizations such as Students First and Families for Excellent Schools (FES), and alternative teacher and leader preparation programs, such as Teach For America and the Relay Graduate School of Education (Kretchmar et al., 2014; Taylor, 2015; Zeichner & Peña-Sandoval, 2015).² Bloomberg's successor, Bill de Blasio, has attempted to curb charter school expansion since taking office in 2013, but he has faced opposition from the robust charter advocacy network that had been firmly in place for a decade (Taylor, 2015).

Given the outsize influence of New York City's neoliberal charter policy and advocacy networks, as White (2018) explains, progressive charter schools generally "draw little attention and often exist in the shadow of CMOs" (p. 94). Nevertheless, progressive charters have continued to emerge and exist. Below, I describe the progressive charters included in this study.

² Families for Excellent Schools closed abruptly in February 2018 amid sexual harassment allegations against its CEO (Taylor, 2018).

Case Descriptions

Empire, Liberty, and Hudson Charter Schools' founding missions and curricular themes were each oriented around progressive pedagogical models that emphasize inquiry and hands-on, experiential learning. School leaders explicitly distinguished these pedagogical approaches from the highly structured “no-excuses” approaches common across urban CMOs (Golann, 2015). For example, Empire co-leader Shellie Peek contrasted Empire with the Success Academy CMO schools, which she described as “back-to-basics test-prep factories.” Further, these schools' founders and leaders each held the progressive political goal of enrolling a diverse student population as a means to advancing equity in a city deeply segregated by race, class, home language, and disability (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014). Each school also instituted leadership structures intended to promote teacher autonomy and professional growth and distribute responsibilities across various layers of the organization, harkening back to the community-empowerment goals of the earliest charter schools (Lipman, 2011).

Empire Charter School. Three teachers founded Empire in the mid-2010s to serve a racially and socioeconomically integrated population through progressive pedagogy. Empire is located in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood and its co-founders hoped that the neighborhood's changing demographics would facilitate an integrated student body. Empire serves elementary students in grades K through 5. Each classroom is co-taught by two teachers, of whom one is certified in special education, and teachers stay with the same class for 2 years, a practice known as “looping.” Teachers and staff incorporate a “Responsive Classroom” approach to behavior management, which focuses on developing students' socioemotional competencies, considered among the co-leaders to be equally important to academic development. Teachers also integrated national political events into the curriculum as a means of fostering students' civic development. For instance, students learned protest songs and made signs to prepare for their participation in the national school walkout against gun violence.

Liberty Charter School. Liberty, also founded in the mid-2010s, was founded by parents and community members as an “unscreened” middle school as an alternative to the neighborhood's academically-selective and highly segregated public middle schools. Like Empire, Liberty's founders aimed to enroll a racially and socioeconomically integrated student body and hoped that its unscreened admission system would facilitate this goal. In addition, Liberty's founders sought to expand adolescents' engagement with and exposure to nature, which is limited in New York City. Thus, Liberty's curriculum is oriented around the theme of green living and sustainability, which is broadly understood as not only caring for the environment, but also sustaining healthy communities through economic, social, and racial justice. This multi-faceted conceptualization of sustainability is incorporated into all areas of the curriculum. For instance, students maintain a small garden in front of the school building, study the impact of gentrification on neighborhoods, and analyze how families participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) can eat healthfully within a limited budget. A related component of Liberty's focus on developing students' sustainable lifestyles is meditation, which the students practice daily. Most classes are co-taught, and, as at Empire, one co-teacher is certified in special education.

Hudson Charter School. Finally, Hudson, a pre-K–12 school, was established by educators in the early 1990s as a traditional public school rooted in inquiry-based, experiential learning and global citizenship development. Nearly 10 years after its founding, Hudson converted to charter status to further its realization of teacher autonomy and its distributed leadership model. Hudson's pedagogy centers on a progressive model, where a standards-aligned curriculum is integrated with project-based learning and emphases on community service and citizenship development. The arts are an integral part of the curriculum: by high school, all students are expected to “major” in fine arts,

music, or theater. Moreover, all students participate in a week-long project-based learning period, in which staff lead them in a range of hands-on projects revolving around a theme, such as immigration, geology, animal welfare, and politics and the media. Hudson's racially and linguistically diverse student body reflects the diversity of its neighborhood, which has long been home to immigrants from Central and South America and Asia and has attracted increasing numbers of white and middle-class residents in recent years. Finally, Hudson is a unionized charter school, whereas most charter schools across the country are not unionized and have been critiqued for weakening unions (Lipman, 2011).

Findings: Mobilizing Local Support Networks and Reinforcing an Unequal Market System

Data reveal that the focal schools' financial support networks were largely community-rooted and school-specific, comprising local individuals and community organizations with a personal connection to the school, whether as a board trustee, parent of an enrolled student, or friend or relative of a staff member. In turn, findings indicate the absence of a broad philanthropic network engaging in convergent grant-funding across multiple progressive charter schools (Reckhow & Snyder, 2014). At the same time, this study's progressive charters mimicked resource mobilization strategies common among market-oriented charter schools such as CMOs, such as mobilizing local networks of high-status, affluent, and politically influential supporters in order to advance their survival prospects in the competitive charter school market (Jabbar, 2015). Although the focal schools' leaders rhetorically distanced their schools from market-oriented charters such as CMOs, they incorporated market-based approaches in their efforts to mobilize financial support networks—approaches that belied the equity and community responsibility dimensions of their progressive missions. These approaches included (a) building affluent networks through the Board of Trustees; (b) leveraging the affluent networks of teachers and school leaders; (c) leveraging the affluent networks of high-status parents; and (d) displaying some willingness to affiliate with philanthropists and political advocates supporting CMOs.

Building Affluent Networks via the Board of Trustees

Across schools, leaders endeavored to cultivate affluent local donor networks by building a roster of wealthy board trustees. As Liberty's Executive Director Justine Caruso explained, board trustees ideally had robust "give-or-get" potential: the ability to make a financial contribution directly or facilitate "connections to deep pockets." This is consistent with research demonstrating that charters often intentionally select for their governing boards affluent individuals or those with access to wealthy networks (Scott & Holme, 2002). Reflecting this strategy, recent additions to Hudson's governing board included Freddie Seiler, an alumnus employed at a large financial institution. Hudson's 10-member board all represented various constituencies: members included teacher, parent, and administrator representatives, founding administrators, child development experts, and the most recent addition, an alumnus. In an interview, Hudson's Development Director Roseann Street suggested that Freddie was recruited to the board not only to represent the alumni constituency, but also given his affluent network: "Freddie does work for a financial institution, so I'm hoping that he's gonna bring some friends" to fundraising events. As a newer school, Liberty lacked an alumni base, but its leaders recruited board trustees through the nonprofit board leadership program at Columbia University's Business School, as well as the online job board of Bridgespan, a global nonprofit social impact organization. Through these board recruitment pipelines, Liberty successfully recruited to its board three finance and business professionals, one of

whom replaced an outgoing member recruited through Columbia. One of these individuals noted the implicit expectation that she would tap her personal network to help fundraise for the school: “To get [affluent] people, you need to be connected with these people.” Notably, on its 10-member board, three were business and finance professionals, including the board chair. Other members included a lawyer and a nonprofit leader. The remaining members included current and former parents of Liberty students and educators at other institutions.

Comparatively, at the time of data collection, four of Empire’s nine-member board comprised business and finance professionals, and an additional two held MBAs and worked for nonprofit or public agencies. Two of these nine individuals were among Empire’s founding six-member board, which largely constituted personal or professional connections of co-leader Hans Barrios, a former investment banker. To illustrate, on Empire’s charter application, one board member, a Stanford MBA graduate, wrote, “For the past 6 years, I have been working in the Goldman Sachs Urban Investment Group on providing financing to charter schools that serve predominantly low- and moderate-income families. During that time, I met Hans Barrios.” The remaining board trustees at the time of data collection included two former educators and one community member. However, board recruitment conversations emphasized individuals with access to affluent networks. For example, during a spring 2018 Empire board meeting where the board discussed the “value add” of a potential board recruit with little experience in or knowledge of education, one trustee remarked, “If we bring someone like that, he needs to write us a big check.”

As these examples illustrate, each school endeavored to cultivate affluent Boards of Trustees in order to access affluent networks of potential donors. In doing so, each school signaled its willingness to participate in an unequal market that further advantages schools with access to affluent individuals and disadvantages those without similar connections, in turn reinforcing inequities across schools (Scott & Holme, 2002). This stands in contrast to each school’s progressive mission to advance educational equity across their stratified communities and to nurture their students’ sense of civic responsibility. Even while attending to potential board members’ progressive political and ideological orientations, in prioritizing individuals with give-or-get potential, each school missed opportunities to incorporate diverse community stakeholders into school governance, diverging from the communitarian dimension of their progressive missions. Hudson is somewhat of an exception, as its board comprised current and former staff members and parents, including those who founded the school in the 1990s. However, recruiting Freddie Seiler over less wealthy Hudson graduates is evidence that Hudson, like Empire and Liberty, prioritized individuals who would lend access to wealthy networks.

Leveraging the Affluent Networks of Teachers and School Leaders

In addition to building affluent Boards of Trustees, across schools, teachers and leaders leveraged their own affluent networks to mobilize resources. For example, teachers at all three schools raised funds through the Donors Choose website, an online platform through which teachers can solicit monetary donations to support classroom supplies or trips. At each school, teachers received full funding for their Donors Choose projects within months, evidence that their personal networks comprised relatively wealthy individuals. To illustrate, at Liberty, 11 donors fully funded a teacher’s request for \$400 to cover a field trip to the Empire State Building, and at Empire, 19 donors fully funded a teacher’s request for \$1,500 worth of iPads; each of these projects received full funding in less than one month.

In addition to teachers, particularly at Empire and Liberty, school leaders tapped their affluent networks to access resources. As discussed above, Empire’s founding board largely comprised personal connections of co-leader Hans Barrios. In addition, Hans’s co-leader, Shellie

Peek, explained, “A family friend of mine gave us a grant to start our library, a 1-year \$8,000,” though she lamented that such grants “are not necessarily sustaining. It’s not like, ‘Okay, I’m going to endow you for \$10,000 a year for your library.’” Liberty’s Executive Director Justine Caruso also leveraged her personal network: on the school’s 990 IRS tax form for 2016, Justine’s parents were listed among the highest financial contributors, having donated \$10,000.

These examples not only illustrate that school leaders leveraged their own personal connections to wealthy individuals, but also suggest that they invested much time and effort into networking to accrue additional resources. This is in concert with research demonstrating that a common resource mobilization strategy among charter leaders is to engage in direct fundraising (Scott & Holme, 2002), an area where CMOs often have an advantage given their dedicated development and fundraising staff (Farrell, Wohlstetter, & Smith, 2012; Quinn et al., 2016). Among this study’s focal schools, Hudson devoted the most human resources to cultivating affluent networks by having on staff a full-time development director, Roseann Street, and a part-time development assistant, Lorrie Fitch. Conversely, at Empire and Liberty, school leaders oversaw fundraising and development in addition to various other administrative tasks. For instance, Empire co-leader Hans Barrios ostensibly served as the school’s development director, but fundraising and grant-writing were among an array of responsibilities. Similarly, Liberty’s Executive Director Justine Caruso described being charged with all “external facing” tasks, including fundraising, and she lamented her limited capacity:

I have no development department... I need to just do the hands-on work of rolling out the annual appeal while also making all those connections, whether it's for fundraising or political support... We don't have the number of bodies that you would have in a bigger school and certainly not the level of specialization that you would have in a network, where you'd have a department to handle different things.

The examples of Justine and Hans reflect research demonstrating that development and fundraising may constrain school leaders’ ability to serve as instructional leaders or connect with families (Scott & Holme, 2002). Hence, networking for funding can carry a cost to schools’ academic programs and community relationships, in turn constraining the realization of their progressive pedagogical and political missions.

Leveraging the Affluent Networks of High-Status Parents

Despite limited fundraising capacity among its school leaders, Liberty and Empire benefited financially from their connections to relatively wealthy networks of parents and other community members, many of whom were active in organizing fundraising events for their schools. This is in concert with Scott and Holme’s (2002) research demonstrating that “schools located in high-status communities have strong and weak ties to many resources, and are therefore able to tap easily into financial, social, and economic capital in their community” (p. 105). Empire and Liberty were each located in high-income neighborhoods situated within geographically larger and more economically-mixed Community School Districts (CSDs), which operate as public school attendance zones. Although nearly 60% of Liberty’s students were classified as economically-disadvantaged, Liberty’s proximity to affluent communities appeared to facilitate its access to robust levels of financial support. For example, upon the launch of Liberty’s winter fundraising drive in November 2017, a grandmother of a Liberty student offered to match donations up to \$5,000. Liberty’s PTA made an additional appeal to the school community in May 2018 to raise about \$13,000 through the online crowdfunding platform Ioby, which would match \$5,000. By the end of May, the PTA had successfully met its fundraising goal. According to Liberty’s 990 IRS tax form for 2016, individual

contributions, gifts, and grants totaled slightly over \$86,000, illustrating the robust collective ability of Liberty's community and networks to contribute.

Similarly, at Empire, the Board of Trustees' financial reports reveal that each year of the school's existence had generated slightly over \$100,000 in donations and fundraising. Despite its diversity goals, Empire disproportionately attracted middle-class and affluent white families; in 2017–2018, only one-quarter of students were economically-disadvantaged, and almost half of all students were white. Evidence suggests that Empire's white, affluent, and professional parents drove the school's fundraising efforts, organizing events such as two ticketed galas each year, including one featuring an auction. In addition, some such parents contributed their professional skills to fundraising initiatives. For instance, one mother, a professional photographer, took students' school pictures free of charge, and proceeds from all photo sales went directly to the school.

Hudson's staff and parent communities had less access to affluent networks. In 2011, Hudson established an affiliated 501(c)3 nonprofit, called Friends of Hudson, to serve as the school's fundraising body, primarily through mobilizing the school's alumni. However, interviewees noted the limits to this form of fundraising, as Hudson's alumni were not very affluent. Indeed, according to its 990 IRS form for 2016, the Friends of Hudson Board had a modest account of around \$8,000. As an illustration of its limited fundraising capacity, Friends of Hudson held an event in spring 2018 to raise funds to keep the elementary art teacher on staff for the following school year. Coupled with direct appeals to parents, Friends of Hudson raised about \$3,000, "which was okay," Development Director Roseann Street said, but not sufficient to retain the teacher. Roseann noted the limitations of such events because "our community does not have very deep pockets."

In continually cultivating relationships with wealthy communities and benefiting from their contributions, Liberty and Empire perpetuated an unequal market system that advantages privileged schools and exacerbates already existing resource inequities across communities (Jabbar, 2015; Scott & Holme, 2002). Relatedly, in neglecting to address how their resource advantages reinforced inequities across public schools in their CSDs and New York City more broadly, Empire and Liberty lost sight of the communitarian aspects of their founding progressive missions. Particularly at Empire, where the school's white and affluent parents led fundraising activities, benefit events served to undermine the school's equity and inclusion goals. To illustrate, Empire's benefit galas "attracted more of the wealthier families," explained Moises Stark, a white parent and co-president of the parent organization. This unintentional exclusion of Empire's poor families mirrors research demonstrating how middle-class and affluent parents' volunteerism in traditional public schools can simultaneously benefit the school while exacerbating inequity (Posey-Maddox, 2014). Hudson's families were less connected to affluent networks. However, as Hudson's neighborhood experiences gentrification, as many New York City neighborhoods have, the impact on its family composition and, in turn, access to potential donors, remains to be seen.

Displaying Some Acceptance of Foundation and Hedge Fund Dollars

Even as they mimicked market-oriented charters in cultivating networks of affluent donors, most interviewees rejected what they viewed as fundraising approaches common across market-oriented charters such as CMOs, including accepting funds from major foundations and populating the Board of Trustees with hedge fund managers. For example, school leaders critiqued New York City's largest CMO, Success Academy, for accepting funds from philanthropic groups, such as the Dick and Betsy DeVos Foundation (Green, 2017), and for filling its governing board with wealthy hedge fund and finance professionals. Contrasting Hudson Charter School's fundraising approach to that of Success Academy, whose Board of Trustees is chaired by hedge fund manager Dan Loeb, Hudson Principal Jolene Agee explained:

We don't have a bunch of hedge fund people who give us a lot of money... we also felt that it was really important that we had people [on the board] who really understood the mission... I don't think we'll ever be the kind of place that's bringing in multimillions of dollars. I don't think we're gonna have Dan Loeb writing us checks.

Empire co-leader Hans Barrios similarly noted his reluctance to accept foundation funding, explaining that some foundations' values contradict Empire's progressive mission. He stated:

We just feel like we didn't agree with how [Walton] made the money... I imagined a particular student who is now in 4th grade who I find to be especially thoughtful and well-read, if she had come to me and said, "Why do we take Walton money?" I wouldn't have been able to look her in the eye.

Rather than accepting Walton and other venture philanthropic funding, Hans explained that Empire receives grants from local community foundations that support progressive programs, such as the school's gender-identity curriculum. Hudson's Development Director, Roseann Street, expressed similar misgivings about accepting Walton funds: "The Walton Foundation has come out with certain [grants] that are appealing to us... even though their political bent is something that we haven't really aligned ourselves with." The Walton family made its fortune through the commercial retail chain Wal-Mart, notorious for exploiting its workers and paying them less than a living wage (Van Buren, 2016). For Hans and Roseann, taking money from such an organization would be inconsistent with their schools' mission to welcome, support, and nurture children from historically underserved communities.

However, some school leaders expressed openness to accepting foundation funding, perceiving such resources to be a boon to their schools' organizational and instructional capacity. For example, illustrating her mixed views on the political implications of accepting foundation funding, Roseann Street applied for a Gates Foundation grant that would fund the development of a student information system, an interesting choice given that Hudson is unionized and Gates, like Walton and other major foundations, opposes teachers' unions (Scott, 2009). Roseann maintained that securing the Gates grant "would be such a windfall... [it] would change our lives dramatically." At Liberty, Executive Director Justine Caruso lamented what she perceived as national foundations' lack of interest in charters unaffiliated with CMOs. She explained:

We tried to get access to some of the Walton funds. We got close. We were in one of the, what I thought was one of the final rounds of interviews. But because we hadn't been proven as a model, and we were new, we didn't stand a chance with that money.

Together, these examples demonstrate mixed views, within and across schools, regarding hedge fund and foundation money. Whereas some interviewees rejected such funding sources given their perceived misalignment with their schools' progressive missions, others viewed such funding in light of how it could bolster their schools' capacity, with less concern about foundations' political and ideological orientations.

Displaying Some Willingness to Affiliate with CMO-Aligned Advocacy Groups

As described above, foundations that support CMOs, including Gates and Walton, also often support advocacy organizations that engage politically to facilitate a policy environment favorable to charter school growth (Reckhow, 2013; Scott, 2009). Similar to their mixed views on

accepting foundation funding, interviewees varied in their willingness to affiliate with CMO-aligned advocacy organizations. On one hand, some interviewees critiqued what they perceived as common political advocacy tactics among CMOs and their advocates. For instance, Hudson's lobbyist, Tanner Stack, described the high-profile rallies of charter advocacy groups, such as Families for Excellent Schools (FES), as "a display of power" and "political theater... to show people who fund these efforts that things are happening." FES set a statewide lobbying record in 2014 (Mahoney, 2015), and its donors included hedge fund billionaires Dan Loeb and Julian Robertson, who also financially supported Success Academy (Chapman, 2015). Tanner argued that, rather than the "scorched earth tactics" common among CMOs and their advocates, his firm's strategy centered on building positive relationships with elected officials and "working with them to be advocates for those [progressive charter] schools." Empire co-leader Hans Barrios expressed similar misgivings with the advocacy efforts among CMOs and their supporters. He noted that he doesn't send parents to the annual New York State Charter School Advocacy Day, organized by two advocacy groups supporting CMOs, as he would feel uncomfortable "standing next to [the] Achievement First [CMO]" and disapproves "what other charter schools are doing" in terms of pedagogy and political engagement.

However, other interviewees expressed some willingness to collaborate with CMO-affiliated advocacy organizations such as FES, considering the high visibility and political clout of FES to their benefit in a political environment where progressive charter schools are little understood or seen. This willingness to collaborate was on display at a fall 2017 board meeting at Hudson Charter School, where among the distributed materials were documents from FES detailing action items for all schools to complete as part of FES's campaign to demand equitable charter school funding from Albany. Hudson's Development Director Roseann Street explained that she and her colleagues "pick and choose" the FES events they join:

For certain issues where they're advocating for one or two particular issues that we can get behind, then we're happy to go up [to Albany] with them and be part of their yellow T-shirts and wave their banners and stuff because they do it so much more efficiently and better than we do. They've got a lot more money to hire the buses, and bring the muffins and the water, and the T-shirts, and all that stuff.

Roseann's comments illustrate that there is some willingness at Hudson to extend their mostly local support network to accommodate those supporting CMOs. Yet her perspective was not broadly shared among interviewees, who generally disapproved of CMOs and their affiliates, given their political efforts to expand market-oriented charter schooling. For example, a leader of the Coalition for Community Charter Schools, an independent charter school advocacy group that helped to launch CPICS, explained, "[Success Academy CEO] Eva Moskowitz... closed school and had her kids march across the Brooklyn Bridge to City Hall... We were invited, [but] our schools said, no, that's not the way to go about things." Empire co-leader Shellie Peek similarly critiqued Moskowitz given that her political advocacy efforts center on raising the number of charters legally allowed to operate in New York State. Shellie remarked, "Eva Moskowitz is opening how many schools, 60 or something, a lot of schools. To me, that doesn't feel like the original intention of a charter school, which is be innovative, create something that can impact the district schools." In sum, although some progressive charter leaders were willing to affiliate with CMOs and their advocates on certain shared policy issues, others rejected the notion of extending their network to include CMOs, their advocates, and their funders.

Discussion: Progressive Charters' Philanthropic Networks as Evidence of Mission Drift

Although this study's focal charters were founded on progressive tenets, they owe their continued existence to a market environment. Hence, to mobilize resources, Empire, Liberty, and Hudson were compelled to compete for scarce resources in a saturated charter school market where CMOs enjoy resource advantages given their access to robust philanthropic networks (Quinn et al., 2016; Scott, 2009). In doing so, this study's focal schools undermined their founding progressive missions by securing their own resource needs rather than working to advance equitable resource distribution across New York City's unequal and stratified educational landscape. The focal schools' support networks were more locally-rooted and school-specific compared with CMOs' convergent venture philanthropic networks. Nonetheless, similar to CMOs, Empire, Liberty, and Hudson were enmeshed in a market context that incentivizes schools to leverage their existing resources to further their own resource advantages while neglecting to address how doing so "[enables them] to maintain or create their privilege, while other schools fall even further behind" (Scott & Holme, 2002; p. 126). In turn, this study's focal schools departed from the communitarian and equity dimensions of their progressive missions, hence exhibiting mission drift (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Weisbrod, 2004).

Mission drift refers to how organizations may lose sight of their founding missions in the effort to attain resources, profits, and organizational survival (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Weisbrod, 2004). Notably, mission drift often occurs as a result of state disinvestment in social services. Likewise, limited public funding for charters, spurred on by New York State's frozen charter school funding formula, created budgetary challenges for Empire, Liberty, and Hudson. These funding cuts occurred amid ongoing local, state, and federal disinvestment in public education, affecting both traditional public and charter schools (Leachman et al., 2017). Yet rather than enacting progressive values by demanding systemic funding reforms and equitable resource distribution across all schools, with few exceptions, Empire, Liberty, and Hudson participated in the competitive market environment by mobilizing networks that would meet their own resource needs. Empire co-leader Shellie Peek summed up how funding cuts compelled her and her colleagues to turn to outside sources of support: "One of our sub-missions was, let's prove to people that we can run a great school on nearly all public dollars, and that's proving to be really hard." Schools' efforts to mobilize additional resources led them to drift away from their founding progressive missions toward (a) self-interested behaviors and (b) considering an "in-between space" on the ideological spectrum.

Drifting Toward Self-Interested Behaviors

In distinct ways, the founders of Empire, Liberty, and Hudson aimed for their schools to broaden equity within their respective communities. For example, Empire's founders intended for their school to foster diversity along the lines of race, class, and disability given interrelated patterns of segregation and gentrification in the surrounding neighborhood. Liberty, with its lack of admissions criteria, was designed to broaden equitable opportunity and access in a community where a selective public middle school admissions process led to highly segregated schools. And Hudson's founders centered the school's curriculum on global citizenship in order to develop students' sense of civic and community responsibility.

However, each schools' approaches to mobilizing funding networks deviated from these commitments to advancing equity and community responsibility. Especially at Liberty and Empire, each geographically situated in relatively wealthy communities, access to affluent networks enabled them to enjoy resource advantages in an unequal market system (Freedman, 2000; Scott & Holme, 2002). School leaders and board trustees appeared not to acknowledge how their own access to

affluent networks advantaged them over other schools. In contributing to broader resource inequities and neglecting to address how their privileges affected the wider community, these schools drifted from the equity and communitarian dimensions of their progressive missions toward securing their schools' own resource needs.

In addition, Hudson, Liberty, and Empire each recruited to their boards individuals with personal wealth or connections to other wealthy individuals. This pattern was especially pronounced at Liberty and Empire. In prioritizing board trustees' give-or-get potential over their ability to represent diverse community perspectives and interests, Liberty and Empire missed an opportunity to fulfill the communitarian aspect of progressive education. Hudson came closer to realizing this dimension of progressivism in reserving board seats for staff, parents, and other community stakeholders, as well as maintaining other venues for stakeholder participation in school governance. Hudson's relatively deeper communitarian orientation is likely due to the fact that the school matured prior to the widespread managerialism of public education spurred on in New York by the Bloomberg Administration (DiMartino & Scott, 2012; Lewis, 2013). At the same time, as evidence of Hudson's attention to enhancing its access to donors, the board's newest recruit was an alumnus employed in the finance industry.

Although similar in strategically building its donor network, Hudson stands apart from Empire and Liberty in collaborating with other schools to press for funding reforms. A conversion charter school, Hudson collaborated with other charters that had similarly converted from traditional public school status. These schools faced unique funding challenges: Though unionized, they were not included in unions' contract negotiations with City Hall, and state funding for charter schools has not kept pace with changes to collective bargaining agreements. Hudson's leaders, along with its lobbyist, advocated for funding reforms that would benefit all conversion charters given these funding constraints. For example, in spring 2018, Hudson's Principal Agee wrote a memo to City Hall in which she proposed several recommendations to the city and state that would benefit all conversion charters, such as requiring unions to include conversion charters at the negotiating table. This memo and Hudson's lobbying efforts seemed to have paid off: Days before the city's summer budget deadline, Principal Agee learned that City Hall included a line item for conversion charters in its budget.

While a notable example of advocating on behalf of multiple schools' resource needs, Hudson's efforts appeared to be an exception, rather than the norm, and was limited only to a small subset of schools in the highly unequal New York City educational landscape. Similar advocacy networks would do well to involve more numbers of schools, both traditional district and charter, and press for reforms that would facilitate equitable resource distribution and mechanisms for enhanced resource sharing. New York City could be a context conducive to resource sharing across district and charter schools, given that nearly half of all schools are co-located, or share a building with at least one other school (Research Alliance for New York City Schools, 2016). Yet some argue that the longstanding political tension between traditional public and charter schools threatens the prospect of productive partnerships among co-located schools (e.g., Aggarwal & Mayorga, 2016). Indeed, Empire co-leader Shellie Peek explained her perception that the principal of the co-located school "feels like I'm coming into her house and taking part of it away." Liberty experienced similar challenges in sharing spaces, such as the gymnasium, with its two co-located schools, and Executive Director Justine Caruso called on the local City Councilmember and Superintendent to support Liberty in negotiating for access to shared spaces.

Notably, all schools in this study displayed efforts to forge connections with other traditional public and charter schools. For example, Empire and Liberty were affiliated with the burgeoning Diverse Charter Schools Coalition, and Empire invited students from the co-located school to

perform at a school assembly. Hudson applied for, and received, grants to share its college readiness curriculum with other public schools in the city and help schools develop their own programs. Yet while these efforts admirably foster community-building, they fall short of meaningfully sharing resources across a market environment where resources are scarce.

Drifting Toward Consideration of an “In-the-Middle Space”

Across schools, interviewees perceived a particular need for progressive education in light of the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump. For instance, Liberty board trustee Ricarda Epstein explained that the Liberty community experienced a renewed sense of urgency around their commitments to equity and inclusion given Trump’s discriminatory rhetoric toward marginalized groups. In addition, interviewees critiqued Trump’s and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos’s free-market education policy proposals. Hudson’s Jolene Agee, for instance, noted: “We don’t want to see the type of chartering that they’ve been advocating be the type of chartering that we’re advocating for... The sort of market-based approach that they support, no accountability, is a little crazy.”

However, other interviewees situated their schools within what Empire co-leader Shellie Peek described as an “in-the-middle space” between market and progressive tenets. Despite her “personal, political” opposition to the Trump Administration, Shellie noted:

Unfortunately, or fortunately, it sounds like we have a White House who’s really into school choice... the day after the [2016] election, the entire staff sat here crying together and talking about how scared we were, but then again, we opened a charter school. To many people, they’re total opposites, but we think there is a way to have this sort of in-the-middle space.

That Empire, Liberty, and Hudson mobilized affluent philanthropic networks in ways that sometimes undermined their progressive missions is evidence of how they occupied an “in-the-middle space” between market and progressive principles. Even as they emphasized the importance of their progressive commitments to equity and inclusion in light of the Trump Administration, schools drifted away from an equity orientation in endeavoring to mobilize the resources deemed necessary for survival in the market.

Liberty’s Executive Director Justine Caruso pointed out the “nuance” across the charter sector, arguing, “There are different kinds of charters. There are community-based charters. There are charters that are doing great, innovative things for all students.” Yet evidence from this study demonstrates that, against the backdrop of widespread market ideology, “different kinds of charters” are similarly compelled to behave in market terms.

Conclusion and Implications

In theory, autonomy from some state and district regulations enables charters to institute alternative approaches to teaching and learning, including approaches aligned with progressive pedagogical and political goals (Knight Abowitz & Karaba, 2010; Wells, 2002). However, autonomy also often means that charter schools operate without district resources, requiring charters, particularly in their start-up years, to find alternative funding sources (Ascher et al., 2001; Huerta & d’Entremont, 2010). In turn, all charters are compelled to compete for resources in a competitive marketplace where the most well-endowed and influential philanthropists favor market-based, more so than progressive, education reforms (Scott, 2009). This study demonstrates that even leaders who created their charter schools to fulfill progressive aims were willing to subvert those aims in

mobilizing resources. Though they applied market logic in strategically mobilizing networks of affluent donors, interviewees largely saw this approach as congruent with progressive values. As Empire co-leader Hans Barrios explained, “I don’t believe there’s anything not progressive about doing what it takes to keep the school open in order to do all the other progressive things that you want to do.”

Findings from this study extend the empirical and theoretical scholarship on charter schools’ philanthropic networks. While a growing body of empirical research has investigated the networked context of CMOs’ financial and political supporters, this study sheds light on charters unaffiliated with CMOs and oriented around progressive aims, a less-examined aspect of the charter school landscape. In addition, this study advances theoretical understandings of the role of ideology in network formation. Although much of this theoretical work to date centers on neoliberal policy and philanthropic networks (e.g., Au & Ferrare, 2015; Ball, 2008), this study demonstrates how network actors can simultaneously be animated by progressive tenets while participating in a system underpinned by neoliberalism’s faith in market mechanisms. In this way, network actors exemplify the ideological tensions between market and democratic values inherent in the charter school movement since its inception (Engel, 2000; Knight Abowitz & Karaba, 2010; Wells, Slayton, & Scott, 2002). While scholars have argued that market values have come to overshadow democratic and progressive values (e.g., Wells, 2002), findings from this study demonstrate that, for some charter leaders, board members, and supporters, the distinction between these values is less clear, as they perceive their participation in the competitive market as aligned with their progressive orientations.

Findings also contribute to the research on how the contemporary market-oriented educational landscape compels traditional public and charter schools alike to compete for scarce resources, often in ways that are in tension with their commitments to equity. For example, a growing body of scholarship documents how both traditional public and charter schools increasingly engage in marketing and branding to attract prospective donors (DiMartino & Jessen, 2018) and parents (Cucchiara, 2013), with the effect of exacerbating resource inequities across schools. Findings from this study extend this line of work by illuminating how charters with explicit orientations toward interrupting structural inequities inadvertently perpetuate them as they cultivate affluent networks that would further their access to limited resources.

As discussed above, definitions of progressive education have evolved and been contested over time. Future research can investigate more in-depth how progressive charters define and actualize progressive education and how these definitions may shape their approaches to mobilizing networks of philanthropic support. In addition, given evidence from this study that progressive charters’ support networks are largely school-specific, future research can examine progressive charters in other geographic and political contexts to discover how contextual differences may affect schools’ resource mobilization efforts. Finally, a fruitful line of future inquiry would be to examine the perspectives of network actors themselves: their political and ideological orientations and motivation for financially supporting progressive charter schools.

Findings from this study carry implications for policy. First, school funding policies must ensure equitable resource distribution across all traditional public and charter schools in order to mitigate against competition for private funding. A promising model is in place in Portland, Oregon, where well-resourced public schools must contribute a portion of private funds raised to a central foundation that then distributes the funds to schools in poor communities, in turn facilitating resource sharing (Cope, 2019). In addition, charter school policies and legislation should be reformed to foreground the progressive aims of equitable resource distribution and financial transparency. As Wells (2002) notes, conservative think tanks and advocacy organizations such as

the Center for Education Reform define a “good” charter law as underpinned by market tenets and allowing such provisions as unlimited charter growth. Wells calls for the notion of what constitutes a good charter law to be reframed by progressive tenets in order to foster the progressive possibilities of charter schooling.

Relatedly, as discussed above, schools serving wealthy families and located in affluent communities have disproportionate access to private funding sources. Hence, policies should interrupt this dynamic by supporting recent demands among students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in New York City for meaningful school integration policies (New York Appleseed, 2013, 2014; Roda, 2018). As Empire and Liberty in particular demonstrate, white and middle-class families and staff were key to connecting the schools with networks of affluent donors. Although Empire and Liberty each aimed to enroll diverse populations, these goals were constrained absent policy mechanisms that would foster integration, a pattern consistent with other “intentionally diverse” charter schools (Jabbar & Wilson, 2018). Recent initiatives in New York City to redesign district lines and alter admissions policies offer examples of how districts highly stratified by race and class can become more equitably resourced (Shapiro, 2018). As stakeholders and policymakers continue to debate integration policies in New York City, they must consider how to extend such policies to charter schools in light of evidence demonstrating that charters often exacerbate segregation (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010).

Finally, this study holds implications for practice. Findings illuminate the need for charter school leaders to examine the alignment between their progressive missions and their approaches to fundraising. In other words, school leaders must carefully consider how their resource mobilization activities advance or hinder equitable education for poor communities and communities of color historically underserved by the institution of public education. By weighing their resource needs against their political and ideological commitments, school leaders can continuously work to attain the fullest expression of progressive education.

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