

Out of Jail and Into Jobs

"Tell the judge I want a program," pleaded Eddie. "Tell him I don't need to be locked up."

Eddie was my client, 16 years old, charged with breaking into a house and stealing a TV and VCR. A Formica table separated us in a dingy room in the Oak Hill juvenile detention center, the jail for kids charged with crimes in Washington, D.C. Like every juvenile client I ever represented, Eddie had one pressing concern: He wanted to go home. He promised me he would do everything right: go to school, attend counseling, pass his drug tests. I believed him; I was a young public defender and it was my job to believe him.

The job of a juvenile public defender is as much social worker as lawyer. In Washington, D.C., the juvenile court still operates, at least on paper, as the founders of the system envisioned over a century ago. Judges are supposed to provide for the care and rehabilitation of the child, as well as protect the safety of the community. In practice, this means that if a lawyer can find a program in

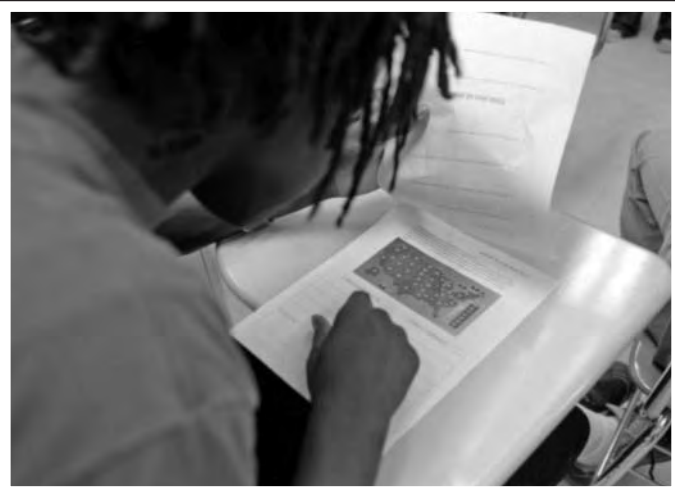
the community that meets a client's needs, there is a decent chance that the judge will put the child there instead of locking him up (see Figure 1).

The more I learned about Eddie's life, the more depressed I became. When he was eight, he was physically abused by his stepfather, who resented the competition for Eddie's mother's attention. When he was 10 he began to act out in school, picking

fighters with other kids and refusing to do his homework. Eventually, he was forced to repeat two grades. At age 13, he was kicked out of school and referred to an "alternative" school for troubled kids. He wandered in and out of this school—nobody really kept track of his attendance—for a few years, until he was arrested and sent to Oak Hill. And now, at maybe the lowest point in an unremittingly dismal life, Eddie was asking me to get him "a program" so that he could go home.

**Maya Angelou
Public Charter School
offers hope and
an education to
kids in trouble**

BY JAMES FORMAN JR.



The curriculum must be rich, robust, and relevant. At Maya, this means selecting themes that are immediately relevant and compelling to students. It means ensuring that lessons focus on essential skills, content, and questions. It means including a combination of direct instruction and project-based, cooperative learning in every class.



As I struggled to respond to Eddie's request, my depression turned to hopelessness. I knew that the city was throwing all kinds of resources into this case. There was money to pay the police who had arrested Eddie, money for the prosecutor who charged him, money for the expert witness who came to court and testified that Eddie's fingerprints were found in the house. There was money to pay me, the public defender. And there would be money for the state—on behalf of we the people—to incarcerate Eddie in a juvenile prison, at a cost of more than \$50,000 a year.

But why was the state only intervening now? Where were we when Eddie was 8 and being abused? When he was 10, couldn't read, and began acting out? When he was 13 and all we had to offer was an alternative school that lacked safety, creativity, and quality teaching?

I had been to this so-called alternative school. The auto-body class had no car or car parts, just an outdated textbook. The only



Message bricks made by students located at the front door of Oak Hill School

trade program with functioning equipment was the "barbering" class, an honorable profession for sure, but hardly suitable preparation for the 21st-century economy. I will never forget the day I went to the school to meet with a teacher and found the class watching a bootleg martial arts video. Interesting videos, the teacher said, were the only way to keep the class "in control and in their seats." Another teacher at the school had told a lawyer in my office that the best time to visit was during class, because "that's when I am free to talk." During class—that was when he was free to talk!

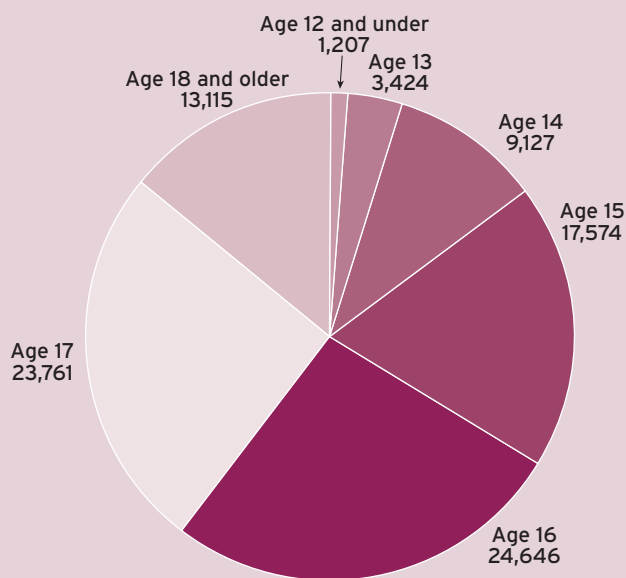
Eddie's court date came. He pleaded guilty and was locked up in juvenile prison.

A few months later, I got a call from a friend of a friend. His name was David Domenici, and all I knew about him was that he was the son of a U.S. senator, worked at a corporate law firm, and did a lot with kids. David wondered about the kids who were dropping out of school, who were on the streets, and who were consigned to terrible alternative

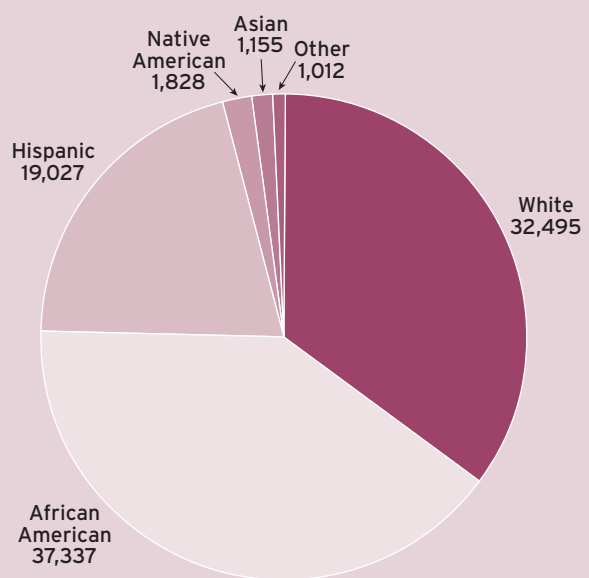
American Youth in Detention (Figure 1)

More than 90,000 American youth were incarcerated in 2006. Nearly one-third were under age 16, and more than two-thirds were nonwhite.

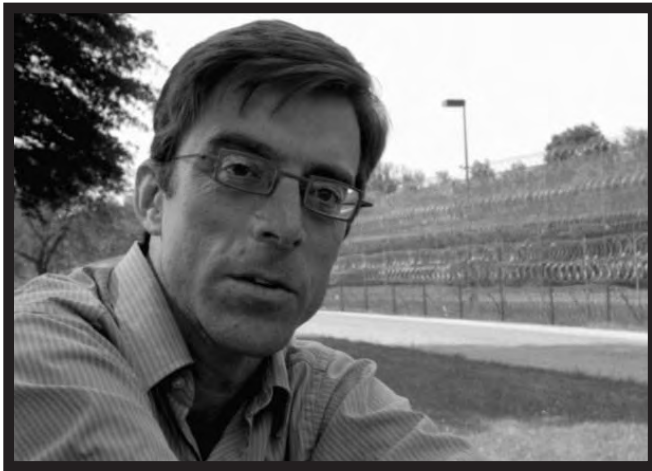
Juveniles in Residential Placement by Age



Juveniles in Residential Placement by Race/Ethnicity



SOURCE: Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement Databook, <http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/ojstatbb/cjrp>



David Domenici, See Forever Foundation/Maya Angelou School cofounder and principal of the Oak Hill School



Samantha (Crandal) Simpre, president of Maya Angelou Public Charter School Alumni Association

schools. He wanted to create a school for these kids that would really work. He had two questions: first, did I think that my clients needed such a school, and if so, was I free to meet?

That was the beginning of what would become the Maya Angelou Public Charter School.

Building a Model

The first thing David and I did was to talk to kids like Eddie and to their families. We asked them a simple question, What kind of school will work for you? Their answers were simple, too: They wanted a school with small classes; a chance to work and make money; counseling; and teachers who cared deeply about them, thought they could succeed, and were willing to both challenge and support them.

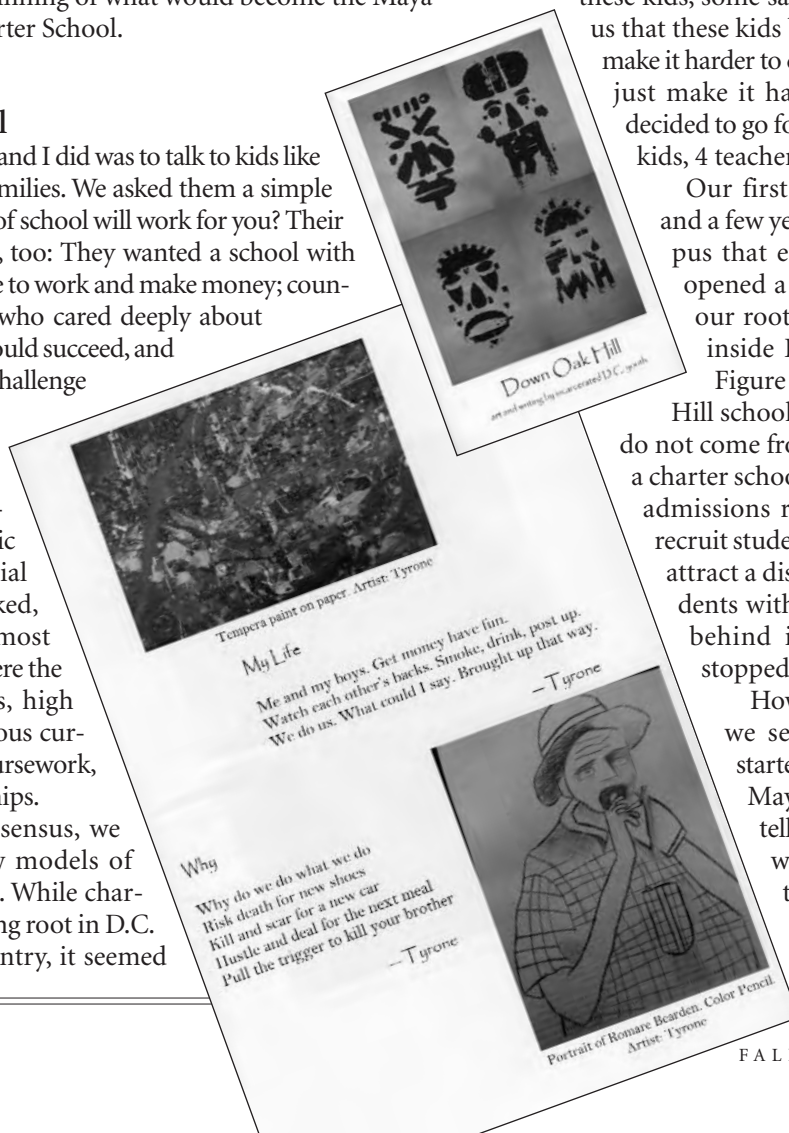
We also talked to experts—educators, juvenile justice specialists, judges, public defenders, and social workers. What worked, we asked? For the most part, their answers were the same—small classes, high expectations, a rigorous curriculum, relevant coursework, and caring relationships.

Despite this consensus, we could find very few models of successful programs. While charter schools were taking root in D.C. and around the country, it seemed

few people were starting charters that would recruit the kids we wanted to serve: kids who were behind in school, who had been suspended or expelled, who had been locked up. For these kids, some said, “It is too late.” Others warned us that these kids bring down your test scores, they make it harder to create good behavioral norms, they just make it harder to run a good school. We decided to go forward anyway, with a school of 20 kids, 4 teachers, and a counselor.

Our first campus now has 120 students, and a few years ago we opened a second campus that enrolls 200 students. In 2007 we opened a middle school and, returning to our roots, we have taken over the school inside D.C.’s Oak Hill juvenile jail (see Figure 2). With the exception of the Oak Hill school, most of our students these days do not come from the juvenile justice system. As a charter school, we take all comers and have no admissions restrictions. But we still actively recruit students from the court system, and we attract a disproportionate percentage of students with special needs, students who are behind in school, and those who had stopped attending school.

How do we educate these kids? First, we set high expectations. When we started the See Forever Foundation and Maya Angelou, we made a point of telling kids and families the first time we met them, “This is your first step toward college, your first step toward a job you enjoy, your first step toward the life you want.”



We received a lot of blank looks in response. What we were saying—about college, about the future—was so different from what these kids and families had been hearing, we might as well have been speaking another language.

I do not for a minute want to suggest that maintaining high expectations in an alternative school is easy. The students arrive with a host of challenges. Most of them are years behind academically. Many have disabilities that have never been properly addressed. Yet we face this task with optimism, not despair. Every young person we have ever worked with—including those who have been incarcerated—has tremendous assets. They each have someone in their lives who wants them to go back to school, get jobs, contribute to their families, and even go to college. We believe it is our job to build on the assets each student possesses.

Our second principle is that the curriculum must be rich, robust, and relevant. What does this mean in practice? At Maya, it means selecting themes that are immediately relevant and compelling to students. It means ensuring that lessons focus on essential skills, content, and questions. It means including a combination of direct instruction and project-based, cooperative learning in every class. It means developing a curriculum that features works by contemporary African American authors. And it means operating an extended-day program with enrichment courses, including dance, music, art, speech and debate, peace and nonviolence workshops, digital music production, street law, and yoga.

The final component of our vision is relationships. We believe that caring, trusting, and loving relationships are the key to success. For many of the kids at Maya, school is a place where they are vulnerable, a place where their deficiencies are on display. How do educators break down the walls that kids put up to hide their academic weaknesses?

There are many pieces to the answer, but a critical one is trust. Kids who have experienced years of school failure have to believe that this time the adults will be different. This time the adults in the room won't give up on them, won't just teach the kids who are getting it, and won't write them off as incorrigible.

This is not easy, by any stretch. By the time they are teens, students who have had academic difficulties and a deficit of

trusting relationships have perfected a variety of strategies to hide their weaknesses and avoid being abandoned again. They can be diffident, defiant, and rude. They can test you beyond the point you think you should be tested. This remains one of the central struggles in our school.

Measuring Success

So how do alternative schools like ours define success? How do we hold ourselves accountable, and how do authorizers hold schools like ours accountable?

I share the concerns raised by many of my friends at the Coalition of Essential Schools that standardized tests do not test many of the things we care about. If you look at our list of school values, you will see we teach many things that have nothing to do with academics. We talk about caring, about empathy, about taking responsibility for each other and the community. We don't have accountability systems to measure whether students become more caring, empathic, or responsible, not because those things don't matter, but because we have not invested sufficiently in the research and development of effective, reliable measurements. We need to do that.

For purposes of this discussion, let's assume that a well-designed test has value. Still, most state assessments are of limited use for a school like Maya Angelou. The majority of our students come to us performing at the elementary school level. When students enter our school as 9th graders, we have only a year and a half to work with them before they take the District of Columbia Comprehensive Assessment System tests (DC-CAS). No one thinks that this is enough time for students to make up deficits of as much as five, six, or seven years.

Moreover, the assessments, at least for now, don't measure a child's acad-

emic growth over time, or enable us to compare our students' growth with that of similar cohorts elsewhere. We desperately need assessments that will provide this sort of data. If we admit a 16-year-old who qualifies for free lunch and is reading at the 5th-grade level, we need to know what his growth should be over the course of the year. If my school were in the top

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The Maya Angelou Public Charter School was created for students dropping out of school, behind in school, or in inadequate alternative schools. The Shaw Campus, headed by Gene Pinkard (far left) now has 120 students.

10 percent of schools in the country, how much would that student improve? What if my school were just average? These are the essential questions for measuring success.

Suppose that the 16-year-old reading at a 5th-grade level continues to advance half a grade in reading each year. Is that success? What if you knew that at the top 10 percent of schools, similar students advance two whole grades in a year? That sounds more like success. Granted, even at that rate the student won't be proficient in a year. But now you've set the stage for an honest conversation about the goals that the school can and should hold itself accountable for achieving. (As the article goes to press, results have been released from a value-added growth study conducted by Mathematica Policy Research in conjunction with New Leaders for New Schools. One Maya Angelou campus was ranked in the top 5 out of the 20 schools in the cohort for growth gains; the other had too few students for results to be considered statistically valid.)

Let's take a step beyond test scores. At Maya, we have a number of other

measures that matter to us. The most important is a longitudinal evaluation of our students' progress after they leave our school. No single piece of data is more important than

this one. Test scores may tell us something about whether a student will graduate from college, get a job, and so on. But if we can measure those things directly, we should. This is especially important for alternative schools that, like ours, self-consciously attempt to teach kids resilience.

Right now we are looking at post-secondary participation and completion rates. (We are planning to expand our data collection to include post-graduation employment rates.) We want to know how many of our students are entering and completing four-year colleges, two-year colleges, and high-quality certificate programs. Then we want to compare their postsecondary success rates with those of two cohorts examined in nationwide longitudinal studies: 1) African American students from families earning less than \$42,000 a year (National Center for

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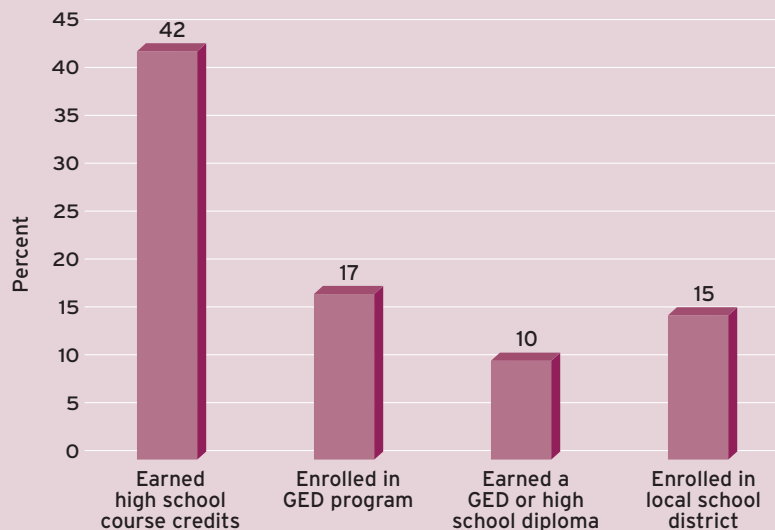
Education Statistics survey); and 2) students attending alternative schools (the Gates Foundation).

Clearly, longitudinal evaluations of this kind have to be, well, long. New research is showing that for low-income students, college degree completion often takes longer than the four to six years that are typically measured. A recent evaluation looked at low-income women at the City University of New York. After 20 years, almost 71 percent of those who entered had earned a degree, and most of those had earned a BA. But 29 percent of those who graduated took 10 years to do it!

Left Behind (Figure 2)

Very few delinquent youth enroll in the local school district while in or shortly after leaving a juvenile corrections or detention program; just over 40 percent earn high school credits.

Academic Outcomes for Students in Juvenile Corrections and Detention (2005-06)



Note: Percentages based on all incarcerated youth, ages 11-21, 16-21, 16-21, and 5-21 for the four outcome categories, respectively.

SOURCE: Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement Databook, <http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/ojstatbb/cjrp>

A host of obstacles—mental health issues, financial troubles, the need to leave school to support family members—can mean that the path to a degree for low-income students is slower than it is for kids with more resources. So we need to take this into consideration when thinking about what benchmarks to set for accountability in this area.

Our students face many risk factors once they leave us—peers who do not always encourage good decisionmaking, bureaucratic educational institutions, employers who do not always treat them well, family members who do not

necessarily believe in their ability to succeed, and a society that has too little regard for low-income black teens. In light of this, we know we must help our students develop a host of social and emotional competencies. Our students learn to control (and reflect on) their actions, set goals and develop plans to attain them, delay gratification, and take responsibility for themselves. Things will not always go right for them, but armed with these skills, they will have the resilience to cope with setbacks and to make constructive, ethical choices.

We think this is one of the reasons that our students, despite their academic deficits, outperform their peers after graduation.

Places of Hope

Maya Angelou Public Charter School's success refutes the idea that kids in our target population are too far gone to benefit from any program, however well intentioned, well designed, or well funded. Some of our students have not achieved the gains we hoped for—no question. But we have found that it is impossible to predict which students will make it, and which will fail. In the absence of knowing that, I submit that it is our moral obligation to give all students the best we have to offer.

I know that some funders think that if you have only a dollar you are better off spending it on prenatal care, or early childhood education, or elementary schools. Fair enough. But for the foreseeable future, and maybe forever, our society will have 15-year-olds who have dropped out of school, 17-year-olds who are mothers, 16-year-olds coming out of juvenile prisons. And until the day we do away with mandatory schooling laws, our society will always be running schools for them. The question is, what kind of schools will they be? Will they be places like what D.C. offered my client Eddie, schools

with low expectations, dilapidated facilities, and teachers who have given up? Will they be resting stations until we are ready to put the child into an expensive prison? Or will they be places of hope, of learning, of caring? That really is the choice.

My vote is for places of hope. Maya is one. There are others. Not enough, though. We need more.

If you want to know why this matters so much, I offer you the words of Samantha C. Samantha is one of our first graduates. She had this to say in an interview last year:

feature

Maya Angelou Charter FORMAN

I was locked up at Oak Hill for a year and a half when I was about 15. There was some schooling there, but what I remember of it was watching movies the whole time. There were no pencils or school supplies at all that I remember.

The way I found my way to Maya Angelou Charter School and See Forever was that David Domenici knew my public defender, so he knew a little bit about my situation and wanted to help me once I got out. He was starting a new school for students like me who had gotten off track. At first the whole idea was denied by the judge. He said I was a menace to society and that I didn't belong in such a school, and it wasn't until David followed through that I was allowed to attend.

One of the first and most important things the school did was to recognize that my household was not ever going to be stable for me. They [See Forever Foundation] opened up a residential home that I was able to live in. They helped me see where different paths might lead, and helped me think through the consequences of different actions. No one had ever provided a blueprint like that for me, to be able to see where I might be headed, for better or for worse, you know what I'm saying?

Another important thing I got from See Forever was my work ethic. They were straight up about it. They'd say things like, "You're really far behind and your dreams are really big, and you're going to have to work to get there, but it's not impossible." They sent me to a precollege exploration course at Wellesley College, to give me a taste of what was possible. But they weren't just talking about schoolwork. My last internship at Maya Angelou was in the human resources department at Marriott, and when I graduated from high school they offered me my first real job.

I've been at Montgomery College on and off for some years now, and I'm considering transferring to Trinity College to finish up. I'm working toward a degree in special education and a teacher's license, because I've seen the good that teachers can do in the world through my own life.

Last year I became the first president of the Maya Angelou Public Charter School Alumni Association. Why? Because the community of support that you build when you're in high school shouldn't just burst

when you graduate. See Forever helped support us and still helps support some of us in different ways. The least we can do is try to support each other.

I was recently in our school at Oak Hill. Three students were sitting in the welcome center, which is our orientation space for students who have just been admitted. One young man wasn't participating. I immediately thought of my client Eddie, who could have been sitting in this same seat 10 years ago. Except one thing is different. Now See Forever is running the school at Oak Hill, transforming it from a



Our students learn to control (and reflect on) their actions, set goals and develop plans to attain them, delay gratification, and take responsibility for themselves.

place of desperation to one of possibility. Now people like Samantha are working there.

You see, Samantha C. is now a teacher and advocate at the Oak Hill school: the formerly incarcerated, special education, supposedly beyond hope menace-to-society Samantha.

As Samantha sat down next to the young man, he blurted out that he wasn't going to do this, because it didn't matter and nothing was going to change anyway. She leaned in close to him and started talking softly.

I left the room. This was going to work out OK.

James Forman Jr. is the cofounder of the Maya Angelou Public Charter School (www.seeforever.org) and a professor at Georgetown Law School. This article was adapted from a speech given at the annual conference of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers in Savannah, Georgia, in 2007.