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Realizing the Promise of Brand-Name Schools

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The proliferation of high-quality independent charter schools is constrained by the shortage of founders committed to evidence-based school designs and possessing the broad-ranging skills to make good on their audacious plans. The time and energies of such exceptional leaders are deployed over years in building schools that rarely reach more than a few hundred students. By contrast, new systems of public schools, managed by or affiliated with private organizations and operating under “brand names,” aim to leverage a common core of human and intellectual capital to benefit not one but many schools and thousands of students. Branded school organizations offer great promise for improving education opportunities, especially to urban students from economically disadvantaged families. Whether for-profit education management organizations such as Edison Schools, nonprofit charter management organizations like Aspire Public Schools, or school networks like the Knowledge Is Power Program, these organizations attempt to bring high-quality schooling to scale. In principle, the rigors of private oversight, the statutory prerogatives of charter schools, a powerful shared school design, and principals who are instructional leaders should yield a potent formula for creating effective new schools. But flaws in the organizations’ strategies, political hostility, and, most important, defects in regulation have thwarted branded school organizations, diverted the attention of their executives from program implementation, and attenuated education outcomes. Nearly ten years after the first brand-name schools opened, research on their academic effectiveness remains scant, but an analysis of existing studies suggests that students in the largest such initiative, Edison Schools, are learning at accelerated rates.

Realizing the full promise of branded school networks will require changes in the regulatory structure; charter laws were intended to spawn individual schools, each with its own lay board, not to foster systems of privately managed schools. Constrained by statute, private organizations have had to act, in effect, as consultants to their charter school board clients. A regulatory structure that enabled a more direct engagement by private organizations in public schooling would dispense with the

intermediary of lay boards, permit the organizations to hold charters directly (while being held accountable for the results), and fund charters on an equal basis with district schools.