

National **Charter School**  
**Resource** Center

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## **Developing City-Based Funding Strategies**

Investments to Create  
a Robust Charter Sector



City-Based Strategies Series

BY DANIELA DOYLE AND LUCY STEINER 2011

## About This Series

In May 2011, the National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC) and the U.S. Department of Education hosted a full-day conference to explore emerging city-based movements that embrace high-quality charter schools as an integral component of their reform strategies. This series of papers aims to continue the discussions from that day by taking a deeper look into three of the topics raised at the conference—city-based funding strategies, building a robust pipeline of talented teachers and leaders, and innovation in incubating new charter schools. Attendees at the conference represented a number of stakeholder groups, but everyone who participated shared a common goal—improving the quality of public education for all students in urban areas. The audience for this series of white papers is similarly united around that central mission and committed to working in partnership with leaders from various sectors. Readers may represent a range of roles: leaders from the charter school community, federal and state policymakers, urban school district leaders, and representatives from foundations, the business community, and community-based or civic organizations in urban areas.

## About the Authors

**DANIELA DOYLE** is a consultant with Public Impact. Her work addresses a wide range of education issues, including teacher quality, school finance, charter schools, early and alternative education, and student engagement. A former elementary school teacher, Ms. Doyle is an alumna of Teach for America and Education Pioneers, a nonprofit that brings innovative leaders to education. She holds a bachelor's degree in public policy from Princeton University, a master of science for teachers degree from Pace University, and a master's degree in public policy from Duke University.

**LUCY STEINER** is a senior consultant with Public Impact. She researches and consults on a variety of critical education issues, including teacher and leader policy, school restructuring, charter school policy, and teacher professional development. Ms. Steiner both conducts her own work and leads project teams to deliver research, training, and consulting. Her work often provides a bridge between district leadership, school leadership, and instruction. A former high school English teacher, Ms. Steiner holds a B.A. with highest honors from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a master's degree in education and social policy from Northwestern University.



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## Why Invest in Charter Schools?

Particularly in lean budget times, philanthropists are under increasing pressure to make investments that produce measurable results. For decades, however, significant investments in public education have largely failed to make a long-term impact on low-performing schools. Many foundations looking for education investments with a better chance of improving student performance have found a promising alternative in the charter school sector.

### **The Promise of Charter Schooling**

Charter schools are independently operated and free from many laws and regulations that constrict traditional district schools. As a result, many funders believe charter schools offer opportunities to raise student outcomes in ways the traditional system cannot. According to a report by Philanthropy Roundtable, donors across the country have supported charter schools because they

- are not subject to the same barriers to change that traditional district schools face
- create opportunities to utilize new and innovative approaches for educating students
- offer families, especially families who cannot afford private school, a choice of schools for their children to attend
- provide opportunities for entrepreneurial leaders to enter education
- are held accountable for academic results
- introduce competitive pressures to improve all public schools (Philanthropy Roundtable, 2009)

### **Student Results**

Although charter schools have an uneven track record, a number of individual charter schools and networks of charter schools across the country have posted outstanding improvements in student learning, particularly among traditionally underserved student groups.<sup>1</sup> Charter networks such as YES Prep in Houston, Rocketship Education in California, and KIPP (the nation's largest charter management organization) have proved that the best charter schools can propel disadvantaged students to achieve at extraordinarily high levels (see feature, "Evidence of Charter School Success").

## Evidence of Charter School Success

### KIPP:

- Students who complete a KIPP middle school are four times more likely to graduate from college than comparable students from low-income communities across the country (KIPP Foundation, 2011).
- In most grades and cohorts, San Francisco Bay Area KIPP students make above-average progress compared with national norms, and they outperform schools in their host districts (Woodworth, David, Guha, Wang, & Lopez-Torkos, 2008).

### YES Prep:

- The network's dropout rate is 1 percent, compared with 9 percent statewide and 16 percent in the surrounding Houston School District (YES Prep, n.d.). Ninety-five percent of YES Prep students are Hispanic or African American.
- About 80 percent of YES Prep alumni are currently enrolled in college or have completed their degrees, compared with 25 percent of low-income students nationwide who enroll as college freshmen (YES Prep, n.d.).

### Rocketship Education:

- In 2010, 80 percent of Rocketship students were proficient in English language arts, and 90 percent were proficient in math. In contrast, just 36 percent and 54 percent of students in surrounding district schools were proficient in ELA and math, respectively (Rocketship Education, 2011).

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Evidence also suggests that in some cities where high percentages of students attend charter schools, students across the city can benefit. In response to competition from charter schools, some traditional schools have extended their school days, offered more rigorous curricula, and created their own autonomous theme-based schools (Lake, 2009). Data show that increased competition in the form of charters has even led to modest student achievement gains across entire districts. See, for example, Zimmer, Booker, Lavertu, Sass, & White (2009); Bohte (2004); and Hoxby (2003).

The opportunity to achieve outstanding results—both at the school and citywide levels—has made the charter sector attractive to many philanthropists. As foundation officers in Albany, Denver, Harlem, and Houston explained in a scan of charter philanthropy in four localities, they did not set out to fund charter schools, but the academic results some charter schools produced convinced them that well-designed charter schools would help them meet their philanthropic goals (Steiner & Doyle, 2011).

## The Need for Philanthropy

Despite such successes, charter schools still make up just a tiny fraction of the market. Scaling up successful charter schools, starting new ones, and building a healthy charter sector in which schools can prosper requires investors to make *strategic* investments. Those investments do not simply plug funding gaps,

but they facilitate the creation of policies and structures that bolster the charter sector and eventually allow it to be self-sustaining. Examples of strategic investments include projects targeting the following:

- school supply
- talent pipeline
- support services
- building support for the charter sector (NewSchools Venture Fund, 2011)

Following is a more detailed description of each of these investments.

## The Need for a City-Based Funding Strategy

Evidence suggests that smart investments in the charter sector, even if modest, can be leveraged to produce big results. Foundations that want to transform public education in their city, and recognize charter schools as a key component of that change, must therefore make their investments part of a broader city-based charter strategy (Kania, Kutash, Obbard, & Albright, 2011).

This report draws on materials and presentations from the National Charter School Resource Center's conference in May 2011, *Transforming Urban Public Education: Exploring the Potential of City-Based Strategies*, as well as previous research that includes dozens of interviews with key stakeholders in the charter sector from coast to coast, including philanthropies, charter support organizations, charter schools, and district personnel, among others.<sup>2</sup> Based on the lessons learned from cities trying to kick-start a new charter market, as well as from some of the most developed markets in the country, this report offers guidance for philanthropies on how to invest wisely as part of a city-based strategy and identifies potentially high-yield investments in the charter sector. In addition, we hope this report can help those actively engaged in their city's charter sector, such as CMOs, talent providers, and school developers, to engage funders in their work.

## Making Strategic Charter Investments

Charter schools face many challenges. No foundation can address them all, but smart, strategic investments can target the most significant obstacles and strengthen the charter sector throughout an entire city.

In this report, we describe four questions philanthropies should consider as they decide where and how to invest in their local charter sector:

1. How do potential investments align with the foundation's theory of change?
2. What are the barriers to change and the underlying causes of those barriers?
3. Do potential investments match the foundation's internal capacity?
4. How does the potential investment fit in the broader charter landscape?

Recognizing that the great majority of foundations are small, we provide examples demonstrating how small and midsize foundations can also have a big impact.

## How Do Potential Investments Align With the Foundation's Theory of Change?

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*A theory of change provides a crucial link between the foundation's organizational goals and the specific projects it funds.*

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A philanthropy's "theory of change" is a roadmap that describes how it intends to reach its goals. A theory of change provides a crucial link between the foundation's organizational goals and the specific projects it funds (Steiner & Doyle, 2011).

For example, the Donnell-Kay Foundation's work supports one main goal—building a strong future for Colorado. The education and well-being of the state's children is critical to that mission because its children will eventually become adults responsible for Colorado's success. Staff members at Donnell-Kay also believe that networks of high-quality charter schools, rather than independent charter schools, have the greatest capacity to change Colorado's education landscape for the better, so they have funded the growth and creation of Colorado-based CMOs, school networks, and intermediary organizations (Steiner & Doyle, 2011).

Similarly, the primary goal of the Robin Hood Foundation in New York City is to fight poverty, and the staff sees education as their best weapon. The foundation directs its education funding to high-quality schools in the city's poorest neighborhoods and to efforts that prevent students from falling behind in school.

## What Are the Barriers to Change and the Underlying Causes of Those Barriers?

Additional funding offers a short-term solution to many charter needs. The best investments, however, aim to eliminate a problem completely by identifying barriers to change and addressing the underlying causes of those barriers. The most powerful investments target the obstacles that cause "bottlenecks" in the reform process, preventing nearly all other change from happening.

Staff members at the Houston Endowment believe that the best way to move children out of poverty is to increase the number of low-income students graduating from high school. Schools exist that are capable of doing so, the endowment found, but they do not have enough seats to serve every student who needs to attend. Having identified an inadequate supply of high-poverty schools with high graduation rates as the underlying problem, the endowment provided scale-up funding for the city's two top-performing charter networks, KIPP and YES Prep, with a goal of serving about 15 percent of Houston's students by 2017 (Steiner & Doyle, 2011).

Although bottlenecks differ from one city to the next, research suggests that charter sectors at similar stages in their development face similar bottlenecks (Steiner & Doyle, 2011; R. Stewart, personal communication, June 21, 2011).

- **Emerging charter sector.** Creating a demand for charters is often a significant barrier in an emerging charter market. The most effective investments may therefore be providing a "proof point"—a single high-performing school that demonstrates both that charter schools can propel students to achieve at high levels in a particular city and what might be possible if that city developed its charter sector.

- **Developing charter sector.** Attracting and retaining effective teachers and leaders are ongoing challenges in a developing charter sector, as are scaling up charter networks and strengthening board capacity through training and development.
- **Mature charter sector.** In mature sectors, charter schools often need help forming collaboratives to address shared needs, such as providing special education services and creating shared purchasing agreements (see feature, “Supporting a Collaborative in Oakland”).

## Supporting a Collaborative in Oakland

Oakland is a relatively mature charter sector, where 18 percent of district students attended charter schools in 2010–11 (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2010b). When the Rogers Family Foundation was considering potential investments, it noticed that the city’s more than 30 charter schools did not interact very often. Although the foundation gives about \$100,000 each year, it was able to leverage its funds to help the California Charter Schools Association hire an executive director to start the Oakland Charter School Collaborative. The collaborative advocates for charter schools on such issues as funding parity between district and charter schools, and it provides the first formal lines of communication among all of the charter schools in the city.

## Do Potential Investments Match the Foundation’s Internal Capacity?

The projects that a foundation takes on should also reflect the organization’s internal capacity. The funders interviewed in our research carefully examined whether they had the staff expertise and relationships with stakeholders necessary to make a difference on a particular issue. This process not only served as an important self-check for foundations, but sometimes unveiled other “nongrant” opportunities to influence the field, or identified the need to cultivate a new skill internally.

### Nongrant Opportunities

The Donnell-Kay Foundation in Denver takes pride in its strong staff. Rather than investing all of its funding on grants, the foundation spends approximately half of its annual budget internally and through contracting with private groups to actively participate in finding solutions to pressing educational problems. The remainder is spent on grants to nonprofit organizations engaged in work that is consistent with the foundation’s strategic direction. One Donnell-Kay grant officer, for example, spends much of her time educating state policymakers about blended learning, a school design approach that mixes in-person instruction with virtual learning. The Donnell-Kay staff members believe that blended learning could help address the shortage of education talent in Colorado.

### Cultivating New Skills Internally

In New York, some of Robin Hood’s grantees lost access to their buildings following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, underscoring the facility shortage many charter schools faced. Grant officers at Robin Hood Foundation wanted to help their charter grantees find suitable space but realized they lacked real estate expertise. Rather than abandoning the plan, Robin Hood hired a real estate expert to assist with future facilities investments.

## How Does the Potential Investment Fit in the Broader Charter Landscape?

*The most powerful investments are part of a city-based strategy that develops a supportive system in which charter schools can grow and thrive alongside district schools.*

The most powerful investments are part of a city-based strategy that develops a supportive system in which charter schools can grow and thrive alongside district schools (Kania et al., 2011). Investments fitting that description work in concert with the efforts of other funders and engage with the district.

### **Coordinating Funding**

According to the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), a lack of coordination among stakeholders often results in wasted resources, duplication of efforts, and missed opportunities to improve quality. Although each foundation has a unique mission, there is often room for funders to collaborate, piggyback off of one another, or complement one another's work. Funders should ask themselves: Could this project leverage investments from other funders or spark high-impact partnerships?

According to Jim Peyser, CEO of NewSchools Venture Fund, a nonprofit venture philanthropy firm, effective investing requires deep market knowledge and relationships (NewSchools Venture Fund, 2011). City-based philanthropies know the local market better than anyone else because they are part of the community. Smaller philanthropies, in particular, can capitalize on their local expertise by identifying promising investments and attracting larger donors (see feature, "Leveraging Large Donors at Donnell-Kay").

### **Leveraging Large Donors at Donnell-Kay**

Although Donnell-Kay awards less than \$1 million annually, it has worked with national foundations such as the Walton Family Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to identify promising grant opportunities in Denver. Part of its success in leveraging larger donors comes from its reputation of having a finger on the pulse of education reform, both in Denver and nationally. Each month, for example, Colorado's business, policy, and education leaders gather for Donnell-Kay's "hot lunch" discussion series to share ideas and hear from the nation's top education reformers.

Foundations must also respond to the work others in the city are doing in the charter sector. For example, when Walton first started its charter work, it identified three priorities: creating new high-quality schools, improving existing schools, and advocacy. Recently, however, a growing number of philanthropies have stepped in to fund new schools, easing that bottleneck. As a result, Walton has shifted more of its resources to advocacy, where fewer funders have been willing to contribute (Steiner & Doyle, 2011).

### **Considering District Engagement**

Ultimately, charter schools are public schools. Therefore, a strong city-based strategy considers how the local charter sector can engage with the school district to increase the overall quality of schools. This engagement may happen through competition, cooperation, or both.

As an intermediary that raises dollars from other funders, NewSchools Venture Fund has invested millions in the charter sector. In addition to supporting charter organizations, NewSchools aims to create an infrastructure that supports citywide school improvement over time in a way that is sustainable. Part of that role includes “connecting the dots” between the work charters are doing and the larger education field. According to Jim Peyser, NewSchools’ new City Funds program aims to create entrepreneurial ventures that foster a mix of collaboration and competition to speed charter sector growth and foster broader reform.

District-charter collaboration is also a focus of education’s largest foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In winter 2010, Gates introduced the “District-Charter Collaboration Compact,” through which district and public schools commit to replicating high-performing models and closing low-performing schools, regardless of school type. The compact also seeks to address points of tension between charters and traditional district schools and to identify opportunities for collaboration such as sharing facilities (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010).

## City-Based Charter Investments

Although charter schools confront a wide range of obstacles, the most prominent obstacles fall into four categories: school supply, talent pipeline, support services, and advocacy (NewSchools Venture Fund, 2011). Following we describe each challenge and provide examples of the types of investments foundations can make.

### School Supply

For charter schools to have a transformative effect on a city’s education system, a city must have a critical mass of high-quality charter schools that not only raises achievement for those schools’ students but also sends a strong signal throughout the city that all schools can, and must, achieve outstanding results, particularly with high-poverty students. Reaching that critical mass gives families a choice among schools and provides an incentive for traditional public schools to improve in the face of competition. In 2010, however, only 10 cities enrolled 25 percent or more of their students in charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2010a). Charter schools in 34 other districts enrolled 15 percent or more of the district’s students.

Cities can use several strategies to grow the supply of high-quality charter schools, including starting brand-new schools, enabling local high-performing charter schools to open more campuses, and encouraging proven charter school networks from other cities to apply to open schools locally. All of these approaches, however, require additional funding in the short term. New schools must spend considerable time hiring and planning before the school year begins. Back-office costs for charter networks grow as the network grows, and proven out-of-market providers generally require start-up funding to set up shop in a new city.

To invest in projects that will grow the supply of high-quality charter schools, philanthropies could

- Provide direct grants to fund the scale-up of proven schools (Hassel, Hassel, & Ableidinger, 2011).<sup>3</sup>
- Invest start-up and development funds to nurture new charter schools.

- Support charter school “incubators,” organizations that build the supply of high-quality charter schools and CMOs without engaging directly in school management (see also “Incubating High-Quality Charter Schools: Innovations in City-Based Organizations,” in this series, available at [www.charterschoolcenter.org/resource/incubating-high-quality-charter-schools-innovations-city-based-organizations](http://www.charterschoolcenter.org/resource/incubating-high-quality-charter-schools-innovations-city-based-organizations)).

## Talent Pipeline

Key stakeholders in the charter sector consistently cite a lack of effective teachers and school leaders as one of the biggest barriers to school quality and growth. Research shows that no educational input has a larger impact on student achievement than teacher quality, and yet highly effective teachers are in woefully short supply, especially those willing to work in the high-poverty schools where they are most needed (Hassel, & Hassel, 2009). Data also indicate that school leaders significantly influence student outcomes, but the pipeline of people up to the challenge of opening and then leading an autonomous charter school is inadequate (Copland, 2001; Roza, 2003; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

In response to these problems, foundations could make investments to do the following:

- Recruit or expand nationally recognized programs that recruit and train teachers and leaders (e.g., Teach for America, New Leaders for New Schools, The New Teacher Project).
- Create new training programs for teachers and leaders who want to work in charter schools, such as a school leader fellowship designed to prepare people for the unique challenges of charter school leadership.
- Create or support an organization that focuses specifically on talent pipeline development, such as New Schools for New Orleans, which includes attracting and preparing talent as one of the three key areas in which it concentrates its efforts to achieve excellent schools for every child in New Orleans.
- Increase virtual learning opportunities and the development of charter schools with new staffing models so that great teachers can reach more students (Hassel & Hassel, 2009; see also “Developing Education Talent Pipelines for Charter Schools: A Citywide Approach,” in this series, available at [www.charterschoolcenter.org/resource/developing-education-talent-citywide-approach](http://www.charterschoolcenter.org/resource/developing-education-talent-citywide-approach)).

## Support Services

As autonomous organizations, charter schools must independently develop the systems and expertise needed to run high-quality schools. At the same time, all charter schools face similar challenges. They must all, for example, comply with special education regulations, figure out how they are going to measure student performance, and recruit effective and engaged board members.

To coordinate efforts among charter schools and to ensure that each one has access to the information and systems they need, foundations could

- Invest in charter support organizations to create high-quality resources that all charter schools can use, such as new leader training or guides for navigating teacher licensure laws (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2008).

- Provide opportunities or space for charter schools to connect with one another to discuss common challenges.
- Fund shared services opportunities that take advantage of economies of scale in areas such as special education services, facilities and operations, and instruction.

## Building Support for the Charter Sector

In interviews throughout the country, charter school supporters were eager for philanthropies to be more involved in building support for the charter sector and highlighting inequities between charter schools and traditional schools. In most districts, for example, charter schools must find and pay for their own facilities. Although philanthropies can increase charter schools' access to affordable facilities by backing a bond issue or constructing a new building, facility financing across an entire city is too large an investment for any one foundation. One of the most effective long-term solutions, therefore, is to change district policies so that charter schools have low-cost, or even free, access to public buildings, just as traditional district schools do.

Foundations can build support for the charter sector and increase awareness of the challenges charters face by awarding grants to local organizations promoting the charter cause. Other options are more direct, such as

- Fund a parent education campaign to raise awareness among parents about the potential benefits of charter schools.
- Publish white papers highlighting inequities between charter schools and traditional public schools.
- Host forums that engage multiple stakeholders.
- Educate policymakers directly about challenges facing the charter sector (e.g., inequitable funding, facilities acquisition, community support).

## Lessons Learned

The best investments to support a city-based charter strategy will, of course, depend on the city. Nonetheless, the key questions foundations need to consider are consistent across sites. Similarly, city-based foundations nationwide can benefit from five lessons learned from charter school veterans:

- 1. Address market failures.** The best investments target a bottleneck in the sector that others are unwilling to fund or have not yet identified. This strategy involves knowing the sector, knowing what others are doing to avoid replicating work already in progress, and identifying and acting on neglected areas (Steiner & Doyle, 2011).
- 2. Have a laser focus on quality.** Charter schools' credibility and transformative powers rest in their quality. Many cities have learned that volume without quality undermines the charter movement (NewSchools Venture Fund, 2011).
- 3. Scale what works.** The charter sector has produced some remarkable proof points. Yet the best charter schools serve just a tiny fraction of the students who need them, causing demand to far outstrip supply. There are tremendous challenges to expansion requiring both innovation and funding.

- 4. Leverage investments by concentrating funding.** Part of leveraging funds effectively includes funding fewer projects more deeply. Philanthropic dollars make up just a fraction of all K–12 funding, so the most effective investments are large enough to make a real impact on a small area (Steiner & Doyle, 2011).
- 5. Identify opportunities for district collaboration.** One of the best ways to maximize each dollar is to invest in efforts that not only improve the charter sector in a city, but the traditional school system as well. Cities where district leaders are aligned with philanthropic goals and where authorizers use rigorous standards to ensure a high-quality charter sector therefore offer the best investment opportunities.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to the most comprehensive evaluation of charter school performance available, which compares performance of students enrolled in charter schools across 15 states with the performance of similar students attending district schools, about 17 percent of charter students outperformed their peers in district schools, while 37 percent did worse, and there was no statistical difference between the performance in 46 percent of cases (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009).
- <sup>2</sup> This report draws from four main sources. The primary source, from which we draw most of our examples, is Steiner and Doyle (2011). Other sources are NewSchools' Venture Fund (2011), Kania et al. (2011), and Philanthropy Roundtable and Public Impact (2009).
- <sup>3</sup> Hassel et al. also contains other ideas about how philanthropy can support rapid scale-up.

# National Charter School Resource Center

1000 Thomas Jefferson Street NW  
Washington, DC 20007-3835  
877.322.8700 | 202.223.6690

**[charterschoolcenter.org](http://charterschoolcenter.org)**

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