Hopes, Fears, & Reality

A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN CHARTER SCHOOLS IN 2011

Robin J. Lake and Betheny Gross, Editors

National **Charter School**
Resource Center

center on reinventing public education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) was founded in 1993 at the University of Washington. CRPE engages in independent research and policy analysis on a range of K–12 public education reform issues, including finance & productivity, human resources, governance, regulation, leadership, school choice, equity, and effectiveness.

CRPE's work is based on two premises: that public schools should be measured against the goal of educating all children well, and that current institutions too often fail to achieve this goal. Our research uses evidence from the field and lessons learned from other sectors to understand complicated problems and to design innovative and practical solutions for policymakers, elected officials, parents, educators, and community leaders.

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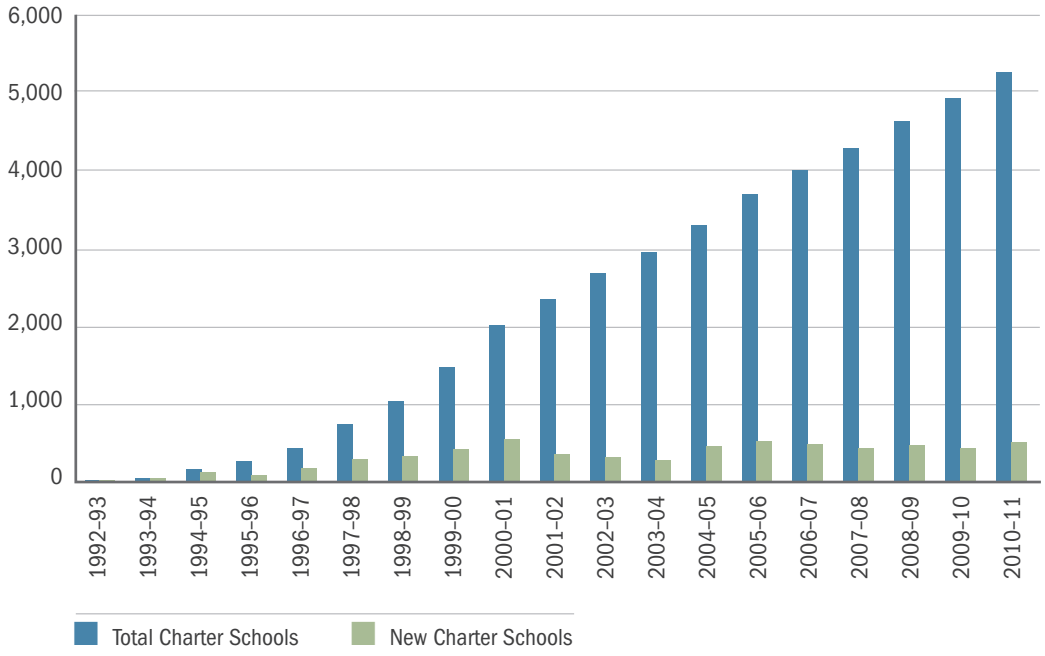
Center on Reinventing Public Education
University of Washington Bothell

January 2012

Fast Facts: Charter Schools in 2010–11



Number of charter schools in 2008–09:	4662	Number of charter schools in 2010–11:	5275
Percentage of public schools that are charter schools in 2008–09:	4.8%	Percentage of public schools that are charter schools in 2010–11:	5.4%
Percentage of all public school students attending charter schools in 2008–09:	2.9%	Percentage of all public school students attending charter schools in 2010–11:	3.7%
Number of states that *expanded* the allowable number of charter schools or charter school students since 2008–09:	16*	Number of states that adopted new rules that *restricted* the allowable number of charter schools or charter school students since 2008–09:	1*
Number of charter schools that opened in 2008–09:	487	Number of charter schools that opened in 2010–11:	519
Number of charter schools that closed in 2008–09:	143	Number of charter schools that closed in 2010–11:	152
Percentage of charter schools in urban areas in 2009–10:	52.3%	Percentage of charter schools in suburban areas or small towns in 2009–10:	28.3%
Percentage of charter schools in rural areas in 2009–10:	16.0%	Number of states with charter management organizations in 2009–10:	25

*In 2010, Mississippi enacted a new charter law that expanded the number of conversion charter schools allowed (from 6 to 12) but restricted the types of schools that can convert to charter school status; therefore, Mississippi both expanded and restricted the allowable number of charter schools or charter school students.

Note: We reported data for 2009–10 when 2010–11 data was not available.

All figures are from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools website. See http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/home and http://charterlaws.publiccharters.org/charterlaws.

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Overview

Consorting With the Enemy: When Charter Schools and School Districts Work Together

Robin J. Lake

More than 15 years ago, my colleagues Paul Hill, Dean Millot, and I wrote an article in Education Week titled "Charter Schools: Escape or Reform?" In the article, we explained that the charter school movement began as an escape valve for disaffected parents and community groups. In order for the movement to mature into a true reform force, we argued, charter schools would have to forge partnerships with school districts, finding ways to compromise and work together.

At the heart of our argument was a concept that Paul Hill promoted in his book, *Reinventing Public Education* (Hill, Pierce, & Guthrie, 1997). Hill suggested that school districts could be far more effective if they stopped trying to run all of their schools centrally and instead oversaw all schools as performance contracts, working with charter school and other providers to run schools for students the district was failing to serve. In this vision, the central office would have to shift its focus from primarily compliance to performance management and continuous improvement.

For many years after we wrote our op-ed, it looked as if school districts and charter schools might never come together in the ways we imagined. Nearly all school districts refused to even recognize that charter schools had a right to exist. Districts were known to call the local fire marshal to make sure new charter schools could not get their fire permits approved in time to open or to delay the release of state funds so that charter schools couldn't pay salaries. Charter school leaders were just as antagonistic—waging aggressive legal, public relations, and political battles to win as many new charters as possible in historically low-performing districts such as Dayton, Ohio; Milwaukee; and Los Angeles.

With very few exceptions, charter schools and districts operated in isolation. Instead of the charter school movement creating a systemwide ripple effect, which was in fact the intention at the heart of the movement's originators, districts ignored or dismissed charter school innovations. Charter school advocates threatened to keep opening schools until districts went completely out of business.

Today, however, charter schools and districts are commonly finding themselves sitting down at the bargaining table to work out deals. This evolution has come, in part, simply because the charter school sector has matured and can now make a compelling case that it can help districts with quality schooling for at-risk students. But districts, too, have evolved. Urban school superintendents across the country are realizing that a centrally delivered, one-size-fits-all approach simply is not viable, and that they need partnerships to bring in entrepreneurial talent and mission-driven teams (Campbell, 2011; Hill, Menefee-Libey, Dusseault, DeArmond, & Gross, 2009; Lake & Hernandez, 2011). Together, districts and charter schools are working on some of the most difficult problems that choice creates in order to reap the deepest and most widespread promise that choice offers.

But moving away from antagonism and defiance and toward true collaboration and problem solving is not easy. To ensure that students with special needs are served equitably, will districts fall back on old compliance-based rules that have never served students well? For the sake of ease and efficiency, should charter schools accept students on a zoned neighborhood-school basis? Who represents the charter school community when the charter schools are making deals with school districts? These are difficult questions, but they are best resolved now, while such partnerships are nascent. This volume of *Hopes, Fears, & Reality* plows deeply into the political risks involved and the technical issues that need to be addressed and provides concrete examples of what charter–district collaboration looks like in the cities furthest out in front, all with an eye toward research and evidence.

EMERGING TRENDS

We begin, as we always do, with an overview of emerging trends in the charter school landscape. In Chapter 1, Betheny Gross and other analysts from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) provide new data showing that the charter

school sector is serving a growing share of minority and Hispanic students and that rural charter schools appear to be on the rise. While the movement's growth remains steady, less of that growth appears to be driven by charter school management organizations than it has in recent years. In line with this volume's theme, we also provide estimates of how many cities are actively partnering with charter schools.

WHY SHOULD DISTRICTS COLLABORATE?

CRPE's Parker Baxter, who formerly ran the charter division of Denver Public Schools, contributed Chapter 2. Baxter examines the factors that are driving districts to collaborate with charter schools, what those collaborations look like, and what kind of political landmines both sides must deal with. Baxter discusses the current trend toward portfolio districts and efforts to develop charter–district compacts. He argues that, by sharing resources and building trust with charter schools, districts gain tremendous leverage to demand greater equity and accountability. Districts have historically viewed charter schools as liabilities, so by building these relationships, forward-thinking urban superintendents risk angering local teachers unions and losing board support. But the superintendents are building the relationships anyway, in hopes of turning charter schools into a powerful new asset for reaching students who the districts have failed to serve for decades.

In the next chapters, we turn to the biggest technical hurdles that cities are likely to encounter when choice becomes the norm, not the exception.

FAIR ENROLLMENT SYSTEMS

Parents' perceptions of district choice reform will be shaped by their experiences navigating the student enrollment and assignment process. If parents cannot trust the enrollment system, if their children don't get assigned to the schools they prefer, and if some parents find a way to subvert the system, the choice system and likely any other reforms the district is implementing along with choice will be undercut. Designing an enrollment system for citywide parent choice that avoids pitfalls is harder than most administrators imagine. In Chapter 3, Tom DeWire of Baltimore Public Schools draws on the experiences of choice plans in Baltimore, New York, and Boston.

DeWire argues that districts designing a new assignment system should first consider what they value. Is it important that historic feeder patterns be preserved? Are there concerns about students crossing gang territories? Should school populations be engineered for diversity? Are neighborhood schools so important that students should be given geographic preferences? The complicated yet essential task of defining priorities will undoubtedly trigger debate in the community and among charter school leaders.

SERVING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

As charter schools expand to become a large part of a city's public school offerings, a critical challenge is how to ensure that students with special needs have plentiful and effective school options. Betheny Gross and I address this challenge in Chapter 4. We argue that charter schools have a mixed track record on this front, but the reasons that special education rates are often lower in charter schools are complex, and the solutions are not obvious. What is clear is that when districts and charter schools work to resolve these issues, they must avoid re-creating a process-based system that has never served those students well in the past. Instead, they should aim for creative solutions that put choice to its best use, creating innovations that better serve some of the system's most unique students.

SHARING FINANCES AND FACILITIES

The allocation of resources tests even the most well-intentioned charter–district collaboration. By reimagining the distribution of funding, facilities, and other district assets without regard to whether a school is a district school or a charter school, Parker Baxter argues in Chapter 5, districts can strike a unique and powerful bargain with charter schools: shared resources and shared responsibility. Baxter explains Denver's effort to decide which district assets should be shared with charter schools, as well as the principles behind the effort. This is an important case study for any city trying to assess how all students can get a fair share of the community's public school assets.

BUILDING THE SUPPLY OF SCHOOLS

Districts interested in collaborating with charter schools usually are most interested in using charter schools as an avenue to create effective new schools quickly. In Chapter 6, Matt Candler of 4.0 Schools lays out four key elements of forming and supporting high-quality new schools:

- Establish relationships with local communities to understand their needs and gain their partnership for new programs.
- Recruit top talent and develop new leadership teams with an eye not just on principals and other instructional leaders but also on those who can effectively oversee school management and operations.
- Provide intensive support to leadership teams during their first three years.
- Manage the supply of schools by holding low-performing schools accountable for performance, closing the lowest performers, and fostering the expansion and replication of successful programs.

Candler, a cofounder of New Schools for New Orleans, draws on his experience working with the Recovery School District to suggest ways that districts can partner with charter schools to turn around failing schools and to support school-based entrepreneurs.

INFORMING PARENTS

In Chapter 7, University of Colorado Denver's Paul Teske, a premier scholar on parent choice, gives a terrific overview of the challenges of helping parents navigate school choice systems. Based on his past research regarding how parents choose schools, Teske answers these questions: What are the best ways to make sure that low-income, immigrant, and other disenfranchised families are not disadvantaged by choice? What information do all parents need to make wise choices when charter schools and other choices become a significant portion of a city's public school options? What are the highest priority investments and responsibilities districts should take on?

WHY SHOULD CHARTER SCHOOLS COLLABORATE?

In the concluding chapter, I discuss the charter school side of the collaboration equation: Why are charter schools collaborating with districts? What do charter schools have to gain and lose? What kinds of compromises are being made, and what are some possible long-term implications? I argue that working with school districts is a necessary step in the maturation of the charter school sector, a step that may allow charter schools to have an impact on a much higher number of students than they could otherwise reach. But the collaborations are thus far creating schisms within some charter school communities. Deals are being made with districts that some charter school leaders are not willing to sign on to. Ironically, even as formalized collaborations tame longstanding mistrust from the school districts, the collaborations could create long-term animosities within the charter school sector.

In all, these chapters reflect a new reality: a complex new set of political dynamics and technical challenges, which the seemingly innocuous goal of charter–district collaboration has set in motion. If a good number of these unlikely partnerships are successful, many more partnerships could follow, forever undoing the notion that charter schools are not public schools. The deals being struck could allow charter schools to operate with equitable funding, reliable access to facilities, and access to district support infrastructure. Districts could shift to a new role as overseers of equitable school assignment, purveyors of parent information, and managers of knowledge about what works.

On the other hand, these collaborations could turn out to be superficial, consisting of mainly easy wins, such as best-practice conferences or lots of meetings and process but little progress. Worse, district leaders could face severe political backlash from their teachers unions and school boards and abandon the efforts. In many ways, charter–district collaboration is the last best hope for reinventing public education. If charter–district collaboration fails, charter school advocates will have to abandon hope of changing the system and set their sights on replacing it.

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Chapter 1

Assessing the Charter School Landscape

Betheny Gross, Melissa Bowen, and Katherine Martin

Starting with the first issue of *Hopes, Fears, & Reality* in 2005, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has tracked the growth of charter schools and noted the trends and facts most relevant to policymakers, researchers, and the public. Twenty years after the charter school movement began in Minnesota, the movement has spread to 41 states and the District of Columbia. Much else has changed as well. CRPE's new analysis reveals some recent trends:

- Charter schools continue on a path of steady growth, with increased room for expansion.
- Smaller states are proving to be more of an engine for growth than once thought.
- Charter schools serve an increasing number of students in small towns and rural areas.
- Charter schools serve an increasingly large share of low-income and Hispanic students.
- The number of freestanding charter schools is now growing faster than the number of charter schools run by management organizations.
- Partnerships have emerged between charter schools and school districts—these partnership structures could support the progress of charter schools for years to come.

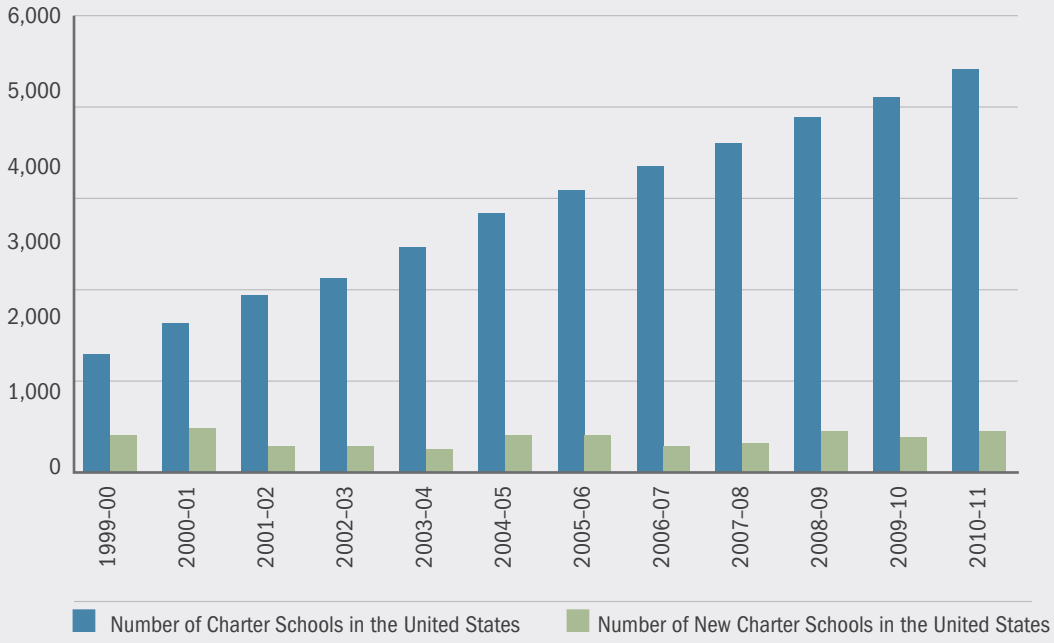
FINDING 1: THE NUMBER OF CHARTER SCHOOLS HAS GROWN STEADILY, WITH ROOM FOR EXPANSION

The upward trajectory of charter schools that started in the early 1990s has never abated. The growth rate for charter schools in the United States remains fairly constant; data gathered by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2010, 2011) indicate that the number of charter schools grew by 7.2 percent between

the 2009–10 and 2010–11 school years (see Figure 1). According to the most recent numbers available, 5,275 charter schools now enroll about 1.8 million students—about 4 percent of all public school students (see Figure 2).

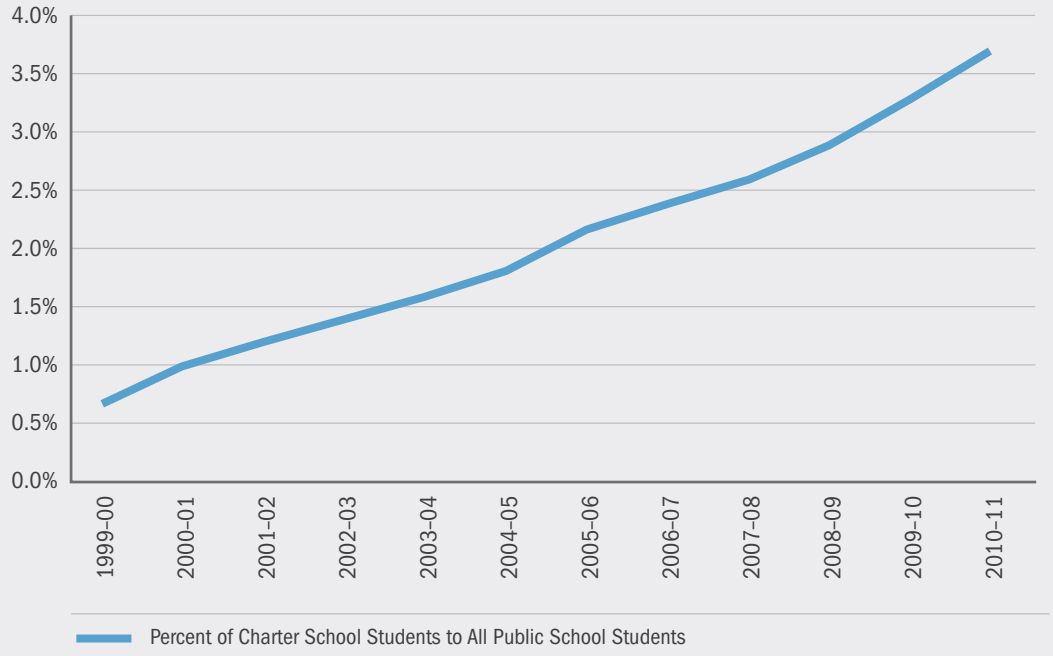
In some cities, the percentage of students in charter schools is far larger. In New Orleans, charter schools serve nearly 70 percent of the city's public school students, and in Washington, D.C., charter schools serve 40 percent. Charter schools enroll nearly 80,000 students in Los Angeles, nearly 12 percent of total student enrollment (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2011).

Figure 1. A Steady Climb of Charter Schools



Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2011)

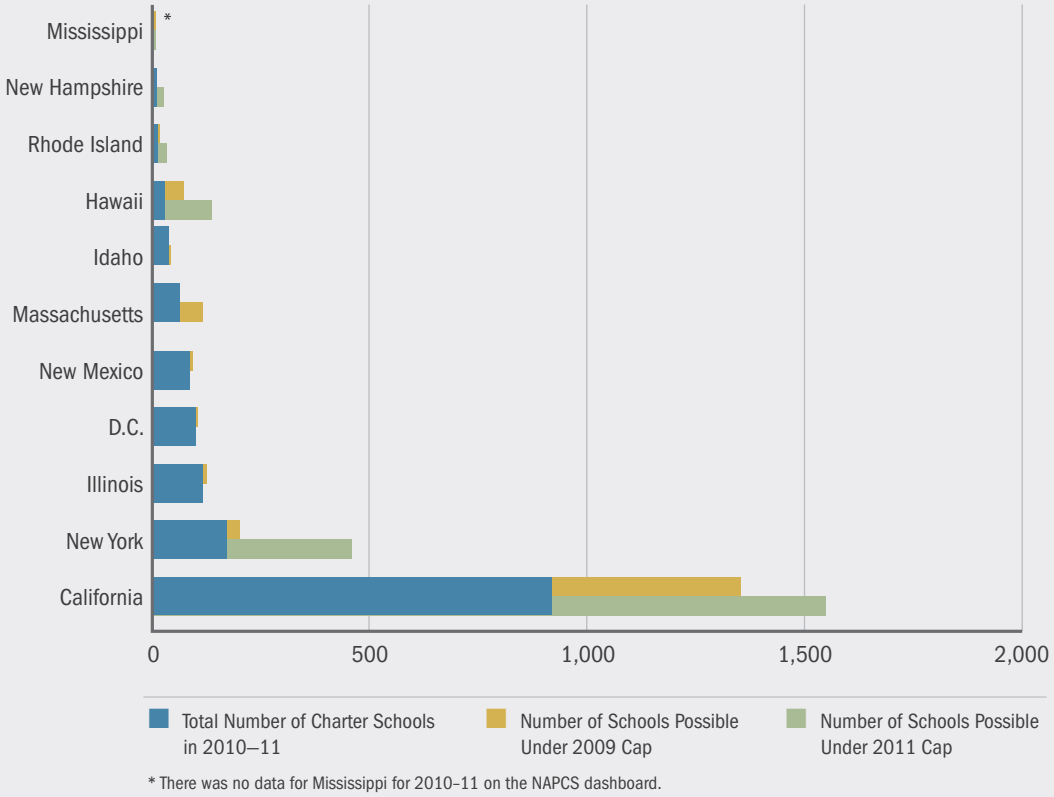
Figure 2. Charter Schools Increase Market Share



Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2011)

For most states, the rate of charter school growth during the past decade can be maintained—or even increased—for years to come. Currently, only ten states and D.C. restrict the number of charter schools permitted to operate. Of the states that cap charter schools, several, including California and New York, have steadily raised their caps throughout the years (see Figure 3). In the past year, three states lifted their caps entirely (Alaska, North Carolina, and Tennessee), likely in response to the federal Race to the Top grant competition, which rewarded charter-friendly policies. And for the first time in many years, a state that previously did not have charter schools—Maine—passed legislation to allow them.

Figure 3. Raising Caps Creates Room to Grow



Source: CRPE analysis of data from National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2011)

FINDING 2: SMALL STATES ARE PRODUCING NOTABLE GROWTH

For years, the bulk of charter school growth has been located in California, Arizona, Texas, and Florida. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2011), those states continue to generate the most new schools, accounting for 49 percent of the 959 new charter schools that opened nationwide between 2009 and 2011. However, if the size of the student population is taken into account, as shown in Table 1, smaller jurisdictions, such as Washington, D.C., Oregon, New Mexico, and Idaho, are unrecognized engines of charter school growth. During the past two years, 32 new charter schools opened in Oregon, one for every 34,051 students in the state. Fifteen charter schools opened in New Mexico, one for every 44,118 students in the state. Washington, D.C., posted tremendous charter school growth, opening a new school for every 6,075 of the city's students.

Table 1. Smaller States, Big Growth

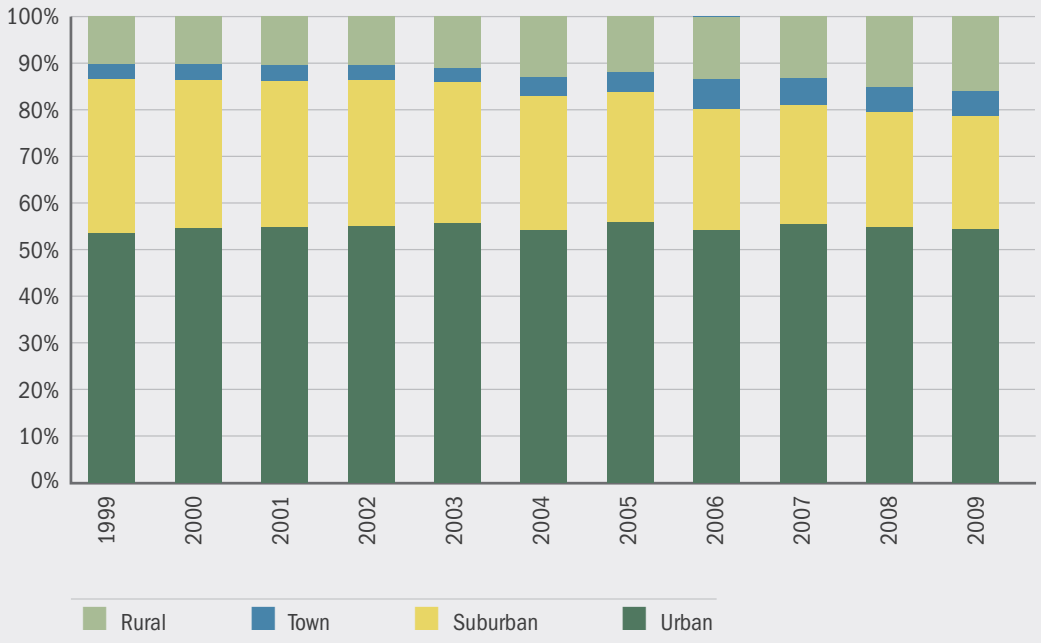
State	Number of Public School Students per New Charter School Opened From 2009–2011
D.C.	6,075
Arizona	33,894
Oregon	34,051
New Mexico	44,118
Idaho	48,298
Louisiana	51,232
Florida	53,035
Colorado	56,922
California	57,520
Kansas	58,026

Source: CRPE analysis of data from National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2011)

FINDING 3: CHARTER SCHOOLS SERVE AN INCREASING NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN SMALL TOWNS AND RURAL AREAS

Charter schools continue to be largely an urban phenomenon (see Figure 4), with more than half of all charter schools located in urban centers. However, recent data show that student enrollment in charter schools in rural areas and small towns is on the rise (National Alliance for Public Charter schools, 2010). Between 1999 and 2009, charter school enrollment in rural areas and small towns rose from around 12 percent to more than 20 percent. But as rural and small town charter schools show rising enrollment, relative enrollment in suburban charter schools is shrinking. This interesting, and until now undocumented, development deserves more research and policy attention.

Figure 4. Small-Town and Rural Enrollment on the Rise



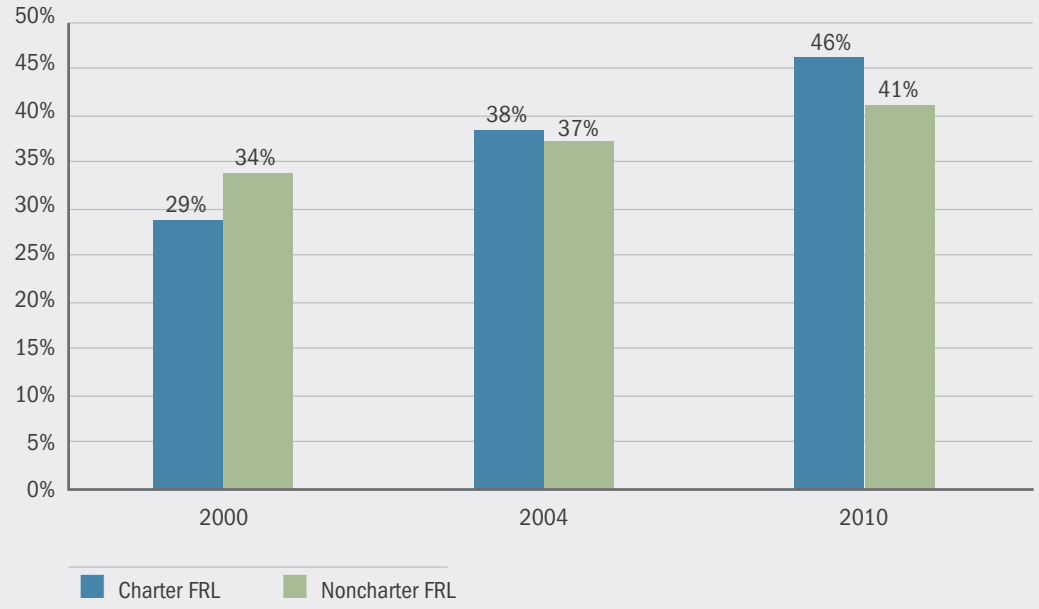
Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2010)

FINDING 4: CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE SERVING MORE LOW-INCOME AND HISPANIC STUDENTS

U.S. charter schools have always served higher percentages of low-income and minority students than have traditional public schools, largely because founders have chosen to locate charter schools in urban areas. Past analysis by CRPE (Christensen, Meijer-Irons, & Lake, 2010) has found that charter schools serve roughly the same percentage of low-income and minority students as do the school districts in which they are located.

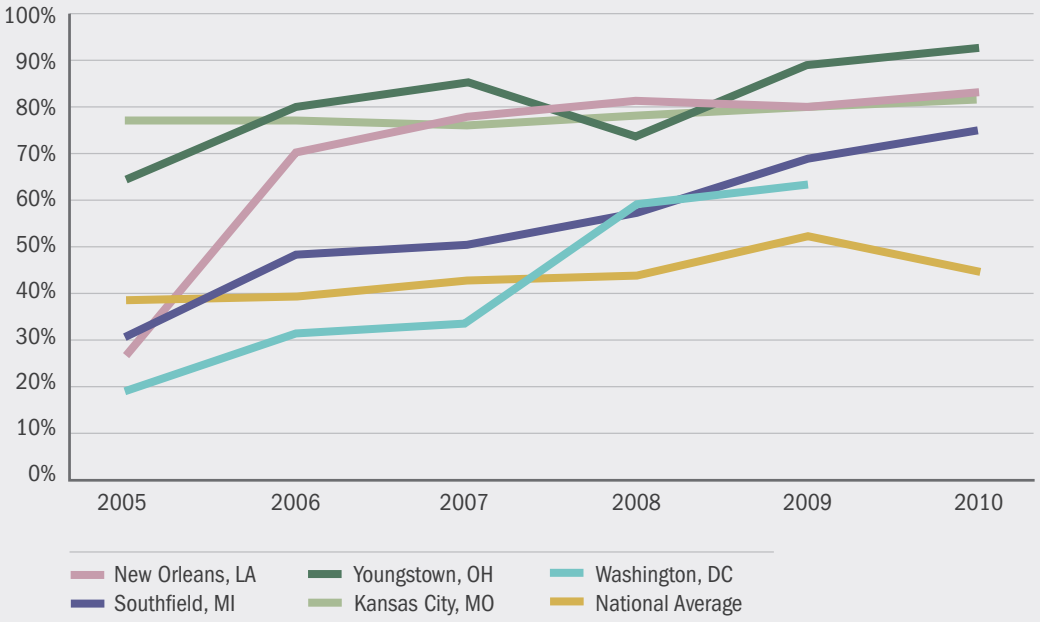
Throughout the past decade, the share of charter school students from low-income families has grown steadily. Today, 46 percent of all charter school students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, compared to 29 percent in 2000 (see Figure 5). This trend is particularly evident in four of the five cities with the largest market share of charter schools (see Figure 6). The share of D.C. charter school students living in poverty, for example, more than tripled between 2005 and 2009; and in Southfield, Michigan, the percentage doubled. Again, there is no way to know what factors are influencing this trend toward needier students. One possibility is that it may be a result of philanthropic support for the expansion and replication of schools that perform especially well with high-poverty, minority students.

Figure 5. Charter Schools Serve Increasing Shares of Students Who Are Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL)



Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2011)

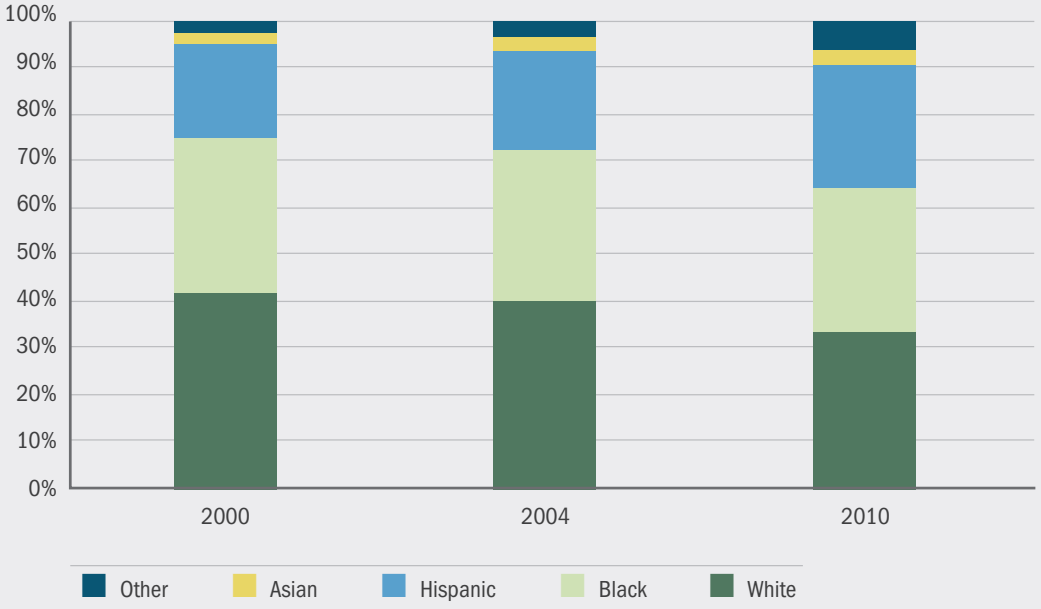
Figure 6. Top Five Charter School Cities Serve Increasing Shares of Students Who Are Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch



Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2011)

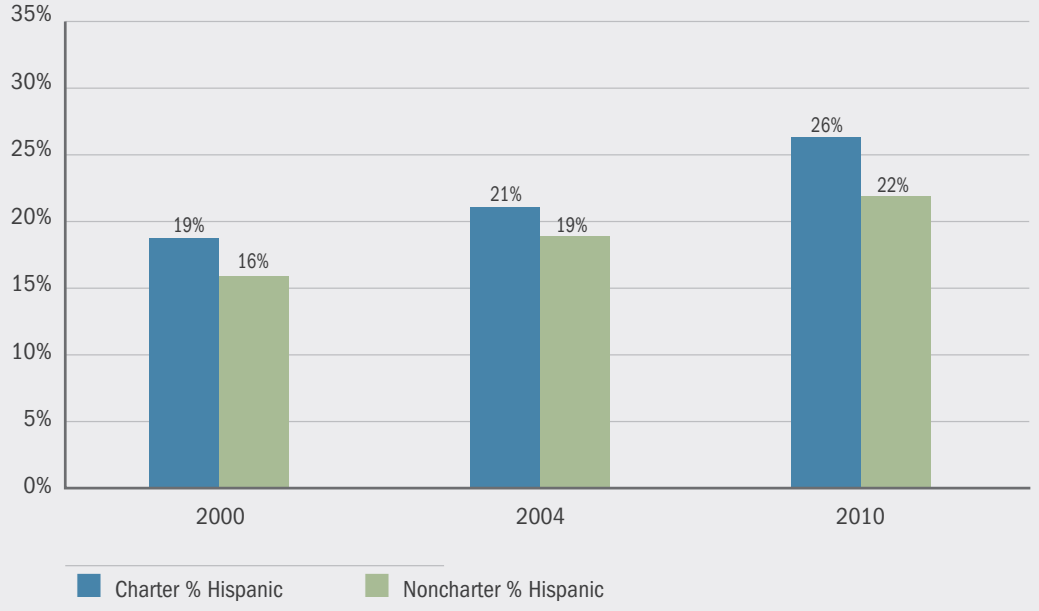
Nearly 30 percent of all charter school students are black, a proportion that has been consistent since 2000 (see Figure 7). Meanwhile, in the past five years, Hispanic students have made up a growing share of the charter school population. In the 2010–11 school year, Hispanic students accounted for almost 26 percent of charter school students, compared to 19 percent in 2000 (see Figure 8). During the same period, Hispanic student enrollment also rose at noncharter public schools, likely reflecting national immigration trends.

Figure 7. Charter Schools Are Reaching More Minority Students



Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2011)

Figure 8. Charter Schools Are Reaching More Hispanic Students

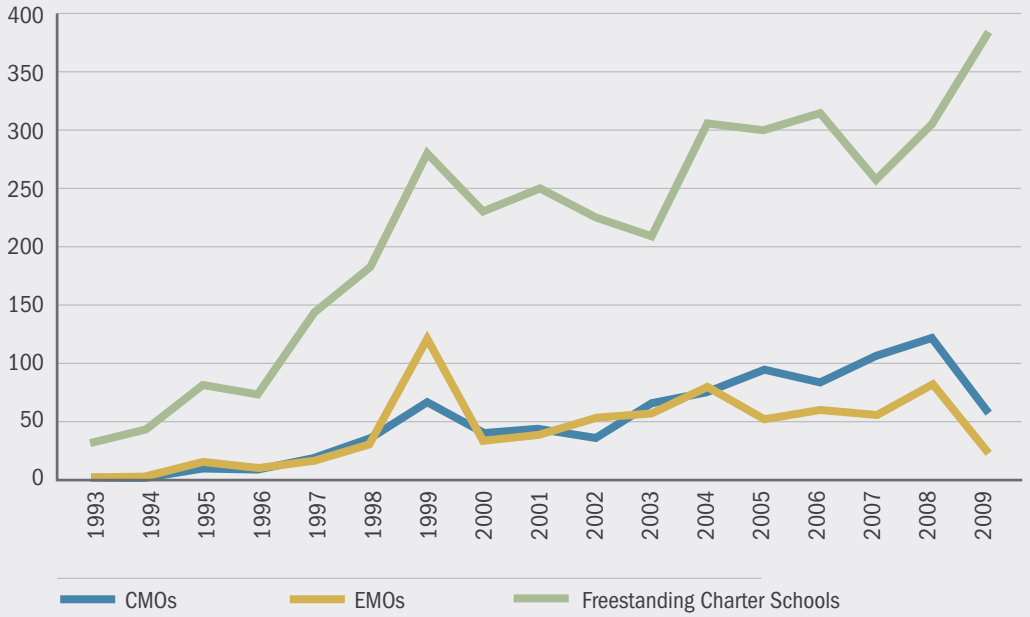


Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2011)

FINDING 5: FREESTANDING CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE NOW EXPANDING FASTER THAN CHARTER SCHOOLS RUN BY MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

When charter school laws were first adopted, charter schools were mostly founded by groups of parents, teachers, or community-based organizations, such as the Urban League. Some for-profit organizations, such as Edison Schools and National Heritage Academies, ran education management organizations (EMOs), which in turn ran a number of charter schools, usually in partnership with local nonprofit boards. But the great majority of charter schools were stand-alone schools. In the early 2000s, nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs), such as Achievement First, Aspire Public Schools, and Green Dot Public Schools, began to receive funding from foundations to replicate successful independent charter schools. As demonstrated in Figure 9, excepting the jump in 1999, both of these types of management organizations showed an overall upward trend until the mid-2000s. Since 2008, however, freestanding schools have regained momentum, and CMO and EMO school openings have declined.

Figure 9. Charter Management Organizations Grow in Number but Are Outpaced by Freestanding Charter Schools

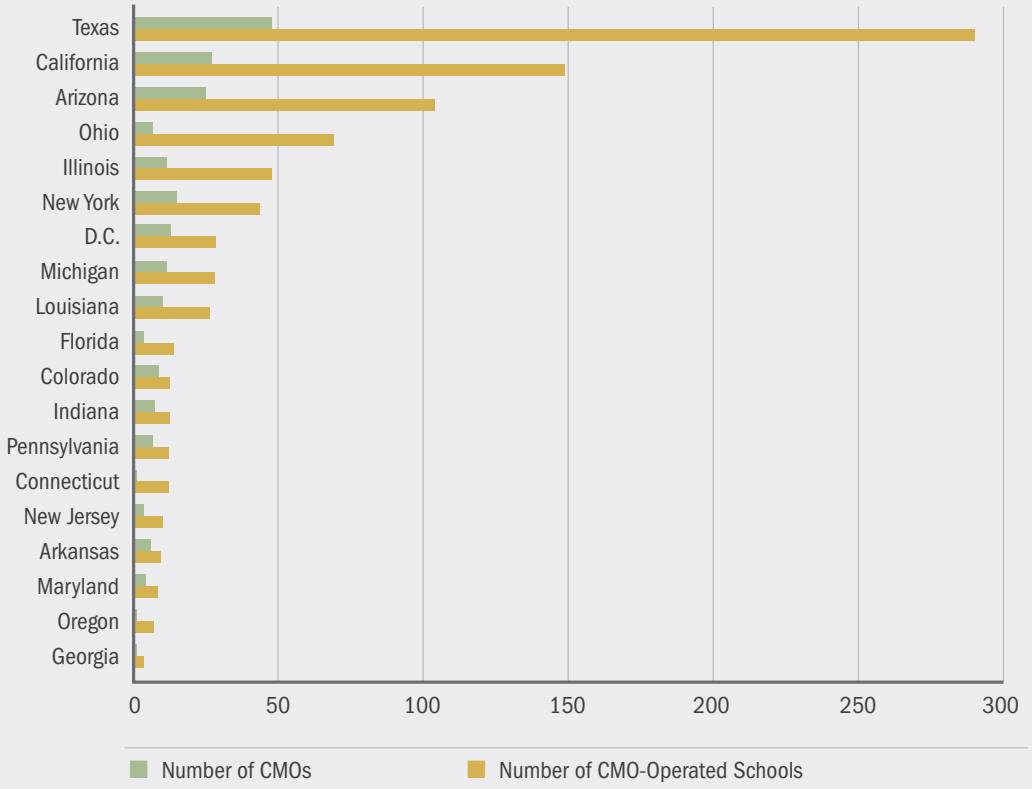


Source: CRPE analysis of data from National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2010)

Note: While EMO growth did decline significantly in 2009, part of the drop is accounted for by a number of charter schools that became unaffiliated with an EMO as of 2009.

CMOs are concentrated in a small number of states, particularly Texas, California, and Arizona (see Figure 10). This distribution is unlikely to change for some time, as only 7 percent of CMOs operate schools across state lines, according to CRPE analysis of data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2010).

Figure 10. CMOs Concentrate in a Small Number of States

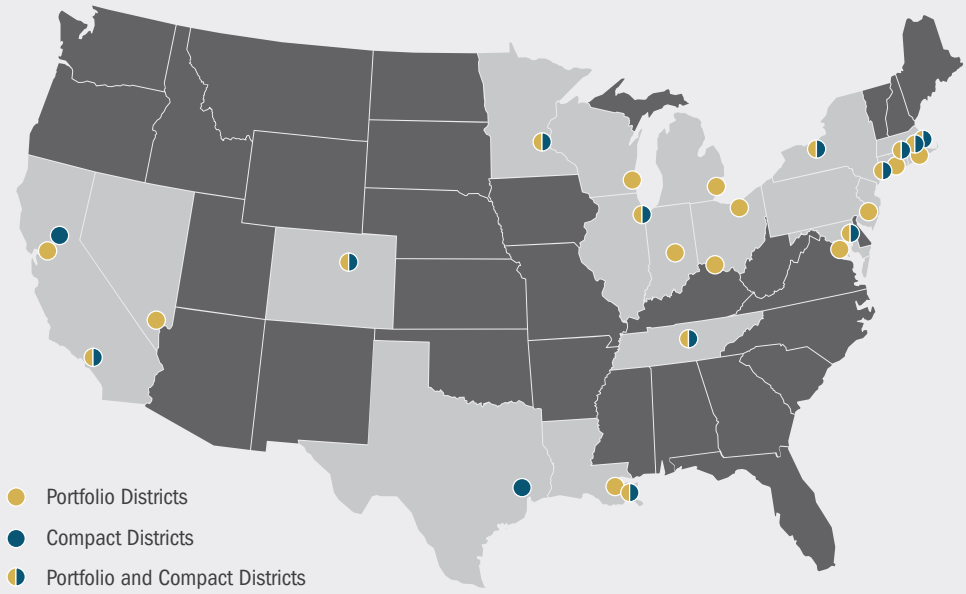


Source: CRPE analysis of data from National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2010)

FINDING 6: PROMISING DISTRICT–CHARTER PARTNERSHIPS HAVE EMERGED

As charter schools broaden their presence in an increasing number of cities, districts are increasingly integrating charter schools into their own reform strategies. In cities such as New York, Baltimore, Denver, and Boston, a paradigm shift is under way from two decades of animosity and winner-take-all competition toward strategic collaboration and partnership. An example of this shift is the growth of portfolio school districts—districts that provide public education through multiple means. What began with only a handful of pioneers almost a decade ago has grown to include at least 24 portfolio school districts across the country, shown in Figure 11 (Hill & Campbell, 2011). Common among the portfolio school districts is a commitment to open the best possible schools for students and close low-performing schools, whether the schools are charter schools or traditional public schools (Lake & Hernandez, 2011; Lake & Hill, 2009).

Figure 11. Portfolio and Compact School Districts in 2011



Source: CRPE (2011)

Building off the momentum of the portfolio districts, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is supporting formal public agreements, district–charter collaboration compacts, crafted and signed by superintendents and charter leaders willing to commit to collaboration on difficult and often divisive issues. The 14 cities to date—Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA; Central Falls, RI; Chicago, IL; Denver, CO; Hartford, CT; Los Angeles, CA; Minneapolis, MN; Nashville, TN; New Orleans, LA; New York City, NY; Rochester, NY; Sacramento, CA; and Spring Branch, TX—have committed to five key principles (Phillips, 2011):

- District and charter schools have a collective obligation to all students.
- Charter schools need to support the success of district schools, and vice versa.
- Students should have access to equitable resources.
- District schools and public charter schools must be equally accountable for student performance.
- Leaders will expand or replicate high-performing schools.

On the ground, district and charter school leaders are tackling issues regarding access for all students, including students with special needs and English language learners, equitable school funding, and equitable access to public school facilities and other public resources. District and charter schools also are pursuing joint teacher and leadership training programs and universal enrollment systems. Though many questions remain about implementation, compacts provide an opportunity for both district and charter schools alike to realize the commonality of their goals and responsibilities and improve the system as a whole.

THE NEXT WAVE OF CHARTER SCHOOLING

If current trends hold, charter school growth will continue to be steady and strong. Expansion of management organizations and emerging partnerships with districts will continue to offer important backing for future growth, especially in urban areas. Such growth likely will mean that charter schools will educate increasing numbers of minority students and those from low-income families. However, whether charter schools will eventually expand beyond urban centers to take on a more significant role in education reform in suburban, small-town, and rural communities remains to be seen. In future years, CRPE will continue to follow these trends and will begin to track the role of charter schools in online learning, school turnarounds, and other emerging areas that could dramatically affect the influence and size of the charter school sector going forward.

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Chapter 2

Mastering Change: When Charter Schools and School Districts Embrace Strategic Partnership

Parker Baxter with Elizabeth Cooley Nelson

Almost 20 years after charter schools were first created, several states still don't allow them, and those charter schools that do exist are often vilified. Most U.S. school districts see charter schools as negative competition, a drain on central resources, and a threat to the "system." There is growing evidence, however, that after two decades of opposition and indifference, a paradigm shift may be beginning.

New charter schools continue to open at a steady pace. In 2011, Maine became the newest state to pass a charter school law. Tennessee and North Carolina raised caps on the number of schools allowed, and New Mexico and Florida passed legislation lowering barriers to charter school creation. In Washington, D.C., charter schools now serve almost 50 percent of the city's public school students. In New Orleans, where charter schools are being used to rebuild the city's public school system from the ground up, nearly 70 percent of students attend the charter schools. In Denver, a city with more than 160 public schools of all kinds, almost 20 new charter schools have been created in the past four years.

As charter schools continue to expand across the country, and especially where they serve large percentages of a community's children, school districts and charter schools are increasingly choosing to abandon negative competition in favor of collaborative partnership. This is not to say that charter schools have moved from the margins to the mainstream or that they never face fierce opposition (Lake, 2010). But in a growing number of communities across America, the relationship between charter schools and districts is transforming, from the traditional paradigm of opposition, competition, and indifference to a partnership based on trust and collaboration through a shared mission, shared resources, and shared responsibility (Finkel, 2011).

A PORTFOLIO OF SCHOOLS

One indication that a paradigm shift is underway is the growth of "portfolio" school districts, which have made a strategic decision to provide public education through multiple means. Districts that have adopted this model manage a portfolio of public schools, operating some schools in the traditional way, contracting with independent groups to run others as charter and contract schools, and holding all schools accountable under the same performance standards. Portfolio district leaders are recruiting educators and school operators, not only locally but also nationally, to open new charter schools and semiautonomous district schools and to help play a role in turning around—and in many cases replacing—the lowest-performing schools (Hill, Campbell, Menefee-Libey, Dusseault, DeArmond, & Gross, 2009).

What began with only a handful of pioneers almost a decade ago has now grown to include more than 20 portfolio districts across the country, including such major cities as Los Angeles, Chicago, Denver, and Washington, D.C. Each district is implementing the portfolio strategy in different ways and some more thoroughly than others. Common among these districts, however, is a focus on creating the best possible educational options for the students in their community, regardless of whether those opportunities are provided by district schools or charter schools (Hill & Campbell, 2011).

It should come as no surprise that charter schools are playing a key role in the expansion of portfolio districts across the country. District leaders who act as portfolio managers view charter schools as partners in a shared endeavor, rather than as competitors, and work to leverage the success of high-performing charter schools and networks to provide new options to families and, in some cases, to transform or replace struggling district schools (Lake & Hernandez, 2011).

Any community wants all of its children to be well educated. Once a school district begins to think about the charter schools as part of a larger portfolio of effective public school options—all of which have the goal of educating all children well—the school district can no longer make sense of treating the charter schools with opposition or even indifference just because the schools are not operated directly by the district. A portfolio district focuses on providing high-quality public education opportunities for children by whatever means necessary—the district does not focus on whether a school is district operated or is a charter school but on whether the school performs well.

A portfolio strategy makes student success—not institutional arrangements—the primary focus of all efforts and allows leaders to customize the supply of learning options to their communities' diverse needs. Continuous improvement is a hallmark of portfolio districts, which commit to expanding and replicating the highest-performing schools and closing and replacing the lowest-performing schools. Portfolio districts constantly search for new ideas (Lake & Hill, 2009).

DISTRICT–CHARTER COLLABORATION

Another indication that the relationship between districts and charter schools is changing is the rise of district–charter collaborations. In a break from two decades of animosity and winner-take-all competition, an increasing number of school districts and charter schools are deciding to form partnerships to better serve the students for whom they share responsibility (Finkel, 2011; Morton, 2011).

In February 2010, a group of superintendents and charter school leaders from 13 cities across the country met in Los Angeles in an effort to try to find common ground. The participants acknowledged the tensions that exist and agreed on the need to put the animosity aside and begin working together to achieve more for all students. "They wanted to look at ways to provide all students in their cities with a portfolio of highly effective education options," wrote Vicki Phillips (2011), former superintendent of Portland Public Schools and now director of Education, College Ready, at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "They courageously expressed their frustrations with one another and then actively sought a common ground rather than a battleground."

The Gates Foundation agreed to support this work through the formation of public agreements, district–charter collaboration compacts, crafted and signed by superintendents and charter school leaders willing to commit to collaboration on often divisive issues such as access for all students, including those with special needs; equitable school funding; and equitable access to public school facilities and other public resources. By improving collaboration, the initiative aims to move closer to a goal of 80 percent of students in each city graduating ready for college and careers.

Nearly a year later, the Gates Foundation announced that superintendents and charter school leaders from nine cities had signed collaboration compacts: Baltimore; Denver; Hartford, Connecticut; Los Angeles; Minneapolis; Nashville, Tennessee; New Orleans; New York; and Rochester, New York. "Leading cities in

the country are already working on many of these issues," Nashville Mayor Karl Dean said at the announcement. "The compacts create a formal collaboration to help put the difficult issues on the table and to recognize a group of leading cities that are demonstrating what cross-sector collaboration should look like in every city." A second cohort of cities—Boston; Central Falls, Rhode Island; and Sacramento, California—signed compacts in September 2011.

The collaboration compacts are different in each city and are tailored to the needs and issues most relevant in each community. In Baltimore, district and charter school leaders have agreed to work together to expand the availability of high-quality school options throughout the city, regardless of school type. In Denver, the school district and charter schools are creating a common enrollment system for all schools, with a single application, lottery process, and timeline. Other compacts address access to public facilities for all schools, equitable funding, and services to English language learners and students with special needs (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2009).

There are also several large-scale collaborations taking place apart from the Gates Foundation initiative. In southern Texas, for example, IDEA Public Schools (a high-performing charter school network), the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District, and Teach for America have embarked on an ambitious partnership, called the Rio Grande Valley Center for Teaching and Leading Excellence. The effort is funded through a $5 million Investing in Innovation grant from the U.S. Department of Education and is focused on developing sustainable capacity to recruit, train, and retain high-quality teachers and school leaders for both the charter school network and the school district. In Houston, the district has undertaken a multiyear initiative aimed at turning around its lowest-performing schools, using methods gleaned from high-performing charter schools studied by Harvard's Roland Fryer and being implemented by his turnaround program, Apollo 20 (Dillon, 2011).

PARTNERING FOR THE FUTURE

More and more school districts are recognizing that they can best achieve their missions not by ignoring or undermining the charter schools in their midst but rather by building trust, collaborating, and strategically partnering with the charter schools to better achieve their shared goal of educating all students well. Likewise, charter schools are increasingly recognizing that their students' success

depends in part on the ability of the charter schools to leverage public resources beyond their own walls and that they share with school districts a common responsibility to ensure equity and quality for all children in a community.

Increased partnership between charter schools and school districts creates risks and opportunities for both. For charter schools, collaboration means less opposition and can often mean access to public facilities and other common public resources, such as bond funds and mill levies. Collaboration also can ensure greater access to district information systems and bulk purchasing, resources for special education students and English language learners, and inclusion in district professional development offerings.

For districts, greater collaboration can mean more transparency and accountability for student performance, access and services for special populations, and improved public governance and financial management. Districts that partner with charter schools also can leverage the value those schools may provide to fill specific capacity gaps, or they can embed the charter schools into district initiatives to turn around or replace low-performing schools. Districts also can use successful charter schools as models for best practices.

The politics are difficult. For many district leaders, even just talking about working with charter schools can draw the ire of opponents. School districts, by design, are built to centralize control, mitigate risk, and avoid uncertainty. Collaboration with charter schools requires a willingness to think in radically different ways about operations, resources, and the balance that must be struck between stability and innovation. Portfolio and other districts engaged in deep and substantive partnerships with charter schools are, in many cases, transforming themselves into entirely new entities. The mission hasn't changed, but the means of delivering the mission has.

For charter schools, the risks are the flip side of that coin. When collaborating with districts, organizations that are designed to operate outside of the traditional system must now engage with the system, even compromise with it, and in some cases become a part of it. Much of the promise of charter schools as a model for reforming public education more broadly comes precisely from their ability to operate with autonomy, free of the constraints of bureaucratic hierarchy that have hamstrung American school districts for more than a century.

The risks of collaboration are real. It is surely a greater risk, however, to disengage and retreat in the face of change. The age of top-down, centralized, and isolated service delivery—of any kind—is over. The future will belong to those who embrace this reality instead of fighting it. For school districts and charter schools, the emerging transformation from combative competition toward strategic partnership is a part of an ongoing and much larger shift happening all across the planet. The industrial age, with production and delivery models based on centralized, hierarchical authority, is over. We now live in a networked society, defined by open information, interconnectedness, adaptability, and decentralized authority and accountability (Castells, 1996).

The innovation and organizational change expert Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1983) wrote, “Change is always a threat when done to me, but it is an opportunity when done by me.” In very different places, for a wide variety of reasons, school districts and charter schools have begun to adapt together to the reality of their interdependence and the commonality of their goals and responsibilities. Others surely will join them, perhaps realizing that it’s better to be a driver of change than a victim of it.

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Chapter 3

Equal Access: Creating Fair and Transparent Assignment Systems

Tom DeWire

Those of us involved in expanding Baltimore City's school choice program throughout the past several years have come to learn that, while school systems approach the design and implementation of choice programs differently, all school systems face common questions and challenges. How can choice be set up to align with the values of the school district and the families in the district? What assignment system will ensure the best fit for all students? What makes the choice process fair?

Until Maryland's charter school law was adopted in 2003 (Maryland Public Charter School Act, 2003), Baltimore City Public Schools offered very limited school choice, primarily only for high achievers. Choice expanded as a result of the charter school law and because of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's small schools initiative, which turned all of the district's high schools into schools of choice in 2004–05 (Neuman-Sheldon, 2005). By 2009, there were 42 charter schools in operation in Maryland, 33 of them in Baltimore City.

Choice expanded to middle schools in 2009–10, when Baltimore closed or turned around several low-performing middle schools and opened new "transformation" schools for Grades 6–12. Unlike most traditional schools, the transformation schools did not have geographic enrollment zones, so by the spring of 2010 the district had effectively removed geographic zones from one third of the district's schools with middle grades. Today, all high school students select their school, one third of incoming sixth graders must choose their school from 32 options, and elementary students can opt into 26 charter schools.

As options increase for students, options increase for school systems as well. When designing and implementing school choice policies, districts must make several key decisions regarding the enrollment and transfer process, enrollment preferences, and the lottery and placement process. The path a district takes should ultimately reflect the values and priorities of the district and the families within it. To understand, it's worth a close look at how these issues are being addressed for Baltimore's emerging choice system, in comparison with Boston and New York City, two school districts with well-established choice processes (Boston Public Schools, 2009; Toch & Aldeman, 2009).

THE FIRST CHOICE: ENROLLMENT AND TRANSFERS

Every district has unique school enrollment patterns and embedded values to consider when creating policies to increase school options for students and families. In addition, district officials must regularly evaluate whether the implementation of choice is consistent with the initial intent of the policymakers. Districts need to consider which entity—the central office or the school—will control enrollment activities such as lotteries, timelines, and rules regarding student transfers, as well as the costs of managing the choice enrollment process.

To place students into choice schools, Baltimore, Boston, and New York City all have centralized enrollment lotteries (see Table 1)—Boston and New York for entry at every grade level and Baltimore for sixth and ninth grades. While Boston and New York have formalized school choice at every grade, options in Baltimore are limited in the elementary and middle grades. However, Baltimore, like New York, offers out-of-zone or choice placements in elementary schools based upon the seats available after zoned students enroll.

Table 1. Summary of District School Choice (charter schools are not included in table)

Grades/Schools	Baltimore	Boston	New York City
Elementary	Zoned Informal out-of-zone choice	Full choice	Full choice, limited seats
Middle	1/3 choice 2/3 zoned	Full choice	Full choice
High	Full choice	Full choice	Full choice

Note: Each district has some exceptions to the system listed here. Charter schools are not included.

In Baltimore, schools, rather than the district, still control many enrollment decisions. About 28 percent of Baltimore students enrolled in traditionally zoned elementary and middle schools live outside the zoned area for their schools. Many Baltimore students who are enrolled in out-of-zone schools entered the school in a nontransition year—for example, seventh instead of sixth grade—so did not participate in the central lottery. In such situations, principals determine admissions case by case. In addition, Baltimore's student placement office handles only about 30 percent of cases in which students transfer after the official choice process. The case-by-case nature of school-level enrollment and transfers raises some concerns about school access and fidelity of the choice processes and creates significant challenges in monitoring and regulating the timing and effect of student transfers between schools.

A formal school choice enrollment and transfer process, coupled with new school options, can arguably increase access for students to all school options. In 2010–11, students formerly zoned to underperforming traditional middle schools now had formal access to 32 options. Students could apply to 28 of those options, including three charter schools, through a centralized choice process, while the other four options, all charter schools, required direct applications to the schools. It is likely many students would not have considered these options were it not for the formal enrollment system.

To ensure that in-district transfers align with the instructional program in schools, Boston has established transfer windows. The windows allow transfers at the end of the first and second marking periods—only a few exceptions are made for transfers after January. In addition, Boston restricts the number of times a student can transfer: once a year during elementary school, once total during the middle grades, and once during high school. In New York City, high school students can transfer only through October of ninth grade, but for a few exceptions. Baltimore, meanwhile, does not restrict when students can transfer.

Districts that are considering increasing and formalizing school choice at the elementary grades and controlling transfers in the middle and high school grades will have to wrestle with increased staffing costs. On a per-student basis, the placement staffs in Boston and New York, cities with highly centralized enrollment controls, are considerably larger than Baltimore's full-time equivalent (FTE) placement staff (see Table 2).

Table 2. Estimated Size of Student Placement Staff

	Baltimore	Boston	New York City
Enrollment School Year 2008–09	82,866	55,371	985,921
Student Placement Staff (FTEs)	7	25	190
Students per FTE	11,838	2,215	5,189

THE SECOND CHOICE: ENROLLMENT PREFERENCES

Districts must carefully weigh the trade-offs inherent in offering students enrollment preferences based on various criteria, versus giving equal access to all students. In making choice assignments, urban districts might consider sibling enrollment, geography, historic feeder patterns, transportation and walk zones, and performance criteria such as academic achievement, interviews, and auditions. Such preferences appease certain constituents and, in the case of geographic preferences, can cut costs or improve safety. But preferences also complicate the assignment process.

Districts and schools have recognized that families often prefer to have siblings enrolled in the same school, particularly in the elementary and middle grades. Boston, New York City, and Baltimore recognize this preference and give siblings of students, through eighth grade, a greater chance of acceptance into those schools. Boston also has a sibling preference for high school. In some states, charter schools allow an admissions preference for siblings or the children of school founders.

Some districts and schools have recognized that families prefer to attend schools within their communities. In Boston and Baltimore, students can attend a school outside of the geographic zone where they live, but students who live within that school's zone receive preference. During the 2009–10 school year, 72 percent of Baltimore students were attending a middle school within their proposed zone. If this pattern continued as the new choice process began, 28 percent of students entering middle grades would have the opportunity to go to a school outside their geographic zone.

Historic enrollment and school feeder patterns can inform how to craft the geographic preferences in a way that addresses family and community concerns. As communities generally consider local schools part of their identity, and travel

time and transportation are a concern for families of younger students, respecting these historic zones makes good sense. But planners know to make exceptions as well. For example, students at one high-performing K–5 school in Baltimore were permitted to transition to a high-performing K–8 school, instead of the lower-performing middle school to which they naturally would be zoned. The district decided that it was more important, and fair, to move the students to a school of similar quality to the school they had been attending.

Where historic enrollment and school feeder patterns are related to neighborhood and gang rivalries, implementation should include the involvement of community groups and school and city police. After a review of safety and gang issues and major road geography in Baltimore, the geographic preferences were revised.

Boston created a preference for students close enough to walk to a school, regardless of the zone in which they live. The school system sets aside half of each school's seats for applicants with "walk zone priority," which means the students live within one mile of an elementary school, 1.5 miles of a middle school, and two miles of a high school.

All three districts have schools that require academic entrance criteria, interviews, or auditions. Particularly in New York City, schools have some flexibility in how they manage the interview process. Most schools with academic entrance criteria are high schools, including some career and technology academies; but districts do have some middle-grades programs with academic prerequisites. For example, Baltimore's Ingenuity Project provides a program for high-achieving students at a handful of middle-grades schools, with admission based upon grades and test scores.

THE THIRD CHOICE: LOTTERIES AND PLACEMENT

The lottery process is one of the most important levers for determining student placement and is an essential tool to ensure fair access to the district's schools. A lottery is also one of the most complex systems to design and operate and is the process the public and even school staff understand the least.

The school assignment process in Boston, Baltimore, and New York used to work, for the most part, like this: Students would rank their top preferred schools. For a given school, the district would run a lottery that included all students who made the school their first choice. If the school still had room after accepting those

students, another lottery would select from among students who ranked the school second, and so on. Students who enter this sort of lottery must play a strategy game of sorts, considering not just their true preferences but the school's overall popularity.

This approach, called a sequential lottery, had many critics. For starters, the process was not clear: A large number of students, and even some counselors, did not fully understand the savvy strategies of rank order that would give them a better shot at getting into at least one school of their choice. For example, if just about everybody was applying to a student's top three choices and her fourth-choice school was not as well known, the student might be better off listing her actual fourth choice first, because the chances of her getting into her first three favorite schools were slim.

A student who didn't know to use this strategy would essentially be wasting her top choices—a common problem under this model. For the 2010–11 school year in Baltimore, for example, 4,111 students selected four popular schools as choices two through five. But those schools filled up solely with students who had picked the schools as their first choice, meaning that the remaining students had useless selections in those four slots. Because of wasted choices, 11 percent of students who entered the lottery that year did not receive placements at all.

In response to criticisms that this selection model was not transparent or fair, the New York public schools adopted a new approach in 2003, with the help of Al Roth at Harvard Business School, who had worked on the national system to place medical residents. In 2006, Boston began using a version of Roth's model, called a simultaneous lottery, or deferred acceptance. Baltimore followed, adopting a simultaneous lottery for middle schools for the 2010–11 school year and for high schools a year later (Toch & Aldeman, 2009).

As with a sequential lottery, students in a simultaneous lottery order their choices. But there is no need to apply strategy to the rankings. The lottery for each school includes all students who listed it, regardless of the ranking. Of the schools a student gets into, he is placed into the one he ranked highest.

Compared to a sequential lottery, in a simultaneous lottery fewer students get accepted to their first choice. But many more students get matched to a school they ranked at all. For the district, a simultaneous lottery has the added benefit of minimizing transfers, because students can express true preferences in their

rankings. As well, a simultaneous lottery can match schools that have academic entrance criteria with the highest performing students in the district, independent of how students rank the schools. In Baltimore, students eligible for competitive-entry schools are ranked by score, so a student with the highest score in the city is guaranteed entry into a selective school whether she ranked the school first or fifth. This means that high-scoring students can consider less traditional schools without the risk of losing access to the selective schools.

MORE SCHOOL CHOICE CHALLENGES

CHARTER SCHOOL LOTTERIES

Entrance into charter schools primarily occurs at the school site, with an application and process specific to each school. In New York and Boston, the authorizing of charter schools happens at the state level. Admissions are completely school based, which means that the cities' departments of education have almost no control over enrollment in these schools, and parents must enter multiple lotteries if they hope to have their children attend a charter school.

By contrast, Baltimore charter schools are authorized locally and have been part of the city's high school choice process since the inception of the process. For the 2011–12 school year, three of seven middle-grades charter schools opted into the central choice, application, and lottery process. Enrollment in Baltimore's elementary charter schools is still completely school based.

For many charter schools, the school-based lottery is a central part of their culture and marketing efforts. But in districts with high poverty, large numbers of non-English-speaking or new immigrant families, and transportation challenges, multiple school-based lotteries greatly complicate access to charter school options. To make access more equitable, it is worth considering a streamlined application process, similar to the common application for college admissions.

OPENING AND CLOSING SCHOOLS

The portfolio management strategy used in many urban school systems involves opening new high-performing schools and closing underperforming ones. This presents unique challenges for school choice.

The primary challenge is aligning the timelines for approving new schools, marketing, and enrolling students. For the most part, Baltimore and New York have phased in new schools, taking one or two grade levels of students at traditional entry points, such as kindergarten or ninth grade. Schools that open by the first round of school choice have the best opportunity for full enrollment, while those opening after students have already made their choices will have a hard time meeting initial enrollment targets. Of course, a school's location, theme, athletic offerings, and other factors all influence families' choice decisions. Ensuring that this information is available by the time school choice fairs are held and guides are published is ideal but not always possible.

When schools are closed, districts must transfer current students—a process that comes with its own complications. When the vote to close a school is timed well, student school choice decisions can occur prior to the lotteries so that no placements are influenced by an invalid school choice. New York phases out its schools to be closed one grade at a time, while Baltimore has closed entire schools all at once and also phased out schools to allow on-track students to complete their senior year. In Baltimore, students are given transfer options to complete their education at another school. The process is modeled on the regular middle and high school choice processes but is customized for the schools and students involved.

Sometimes parents fail to make any choices, even after district officials reach out to them. When that happens, administrators assign the children to whatever schools have space left. Boston and New York have multiple lottery rounds. While they reach a majority of students in the first round, there are always students who do not participate in any of the rounds. In Baltimore, Boston, and New York, those students usually are administratively assigned to schools based on geographic location and available seats. In 2009, New York administratively assigned about 1 percent of students to high schools (Toch & Aldeman, 2009). For the 2010–11 school year, Baltimore worked one-on-one after the choice process with about 7 percent of entering sixth graders and 9 percent of entering ninth graders to make administrative assignments. In Boston, about 10 percent of students were administratively assigned after the second round of school choice (C. Chin, personal communication, March 2010).

SCHOOL ENGINEERING

School assignment policies and implementation structures can be leveraged to have a significant impact on student achievement and the climate and culture in a building. These policies and structures send a message about what a district values. Along those lines, there are several reasons a district might consider proactively engineering schools. First, school engineering might provide for academic diversity across school options. Second, a school system can create programs that benefit at-risk students, for example, by using choice to target overage and underachieving students for accelerator programs. Third, a district can use choice to ensure that students with special needs are not overrepresented at any given school to a degree that negatively affects achievement levels, culture, and climate. Last, districts can manage choice in a way that provides selective schools to attract middle-class families, without decreasing the academic diversity at other schools. In Baltimore, 33 percent of first-time ninth graders attend a school with academic entrance criteria. If high achievers are overly concentrated in certain schools, this can hurt the demographics, culture, and academic learning climate of other schools.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD IN BALTIMORE

Baltimore City Public Schools are continually evaluating how to improve school choice options and operations and adjusting the assignment system to adapt to the growth of great schools. In the years to come, the district is likely to consider all of the approaches to school engineering mentioned previously. And the district may take more steps to make the process more efficient and effective for both families and the school system itself.

The district might consider a more centralized enrollment process, akin to New York City's and Boston's processes. (While it makes sense for a district to take on more enrollment functions in this way, easing concerns around access to schools, such a move comes with costs. Baltimore's student placement staff now is efficient but small, authorizing no more than two in five middle and high school placements and transfers after school choice lotteries were conducted.) Other changes the district might adopt include school choice at all grades for out-of-zone entry, enrollment windows for student transfers, and a secondary selection process for choice seats remaining after the first lottery.

To make selecting the right school easier for families, the district is likely to consolidate its many school choice fairs into one comprehensive event and adopt a single choice timeline too. All school choice information for the public may be accompanied by student performance data from each school, and the district may create an interest inventory students can fill out to see which schools match their personal priorities.

Through efficient management, robust information, and personalization, the Baltimore City Public Schools can meet their ultimate goal: a choice system that reflects the values of the community and gets all students into schools that are right for them.

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Chapter 4

Making Choice Work for Students With Special Needs

Robin J. Lake and Betheny Gross

Many students with special needs have never been adequately served in public education. In most school districts, the academic achievement and dropout rates are dismal for students whose disabilities entitle them to an individual education plan (IEP). Recent studies show that 12th-grade students in special education earned, on average, three credits fewer than other students, enough to thwart graduation. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2007) show that only 60 percent of students in special education aged 18 to 21 graduated with a diploma. There have been tremendous improvements to the legal rights of students with special needs during the past few decades, primarily through the formation of powerful Washington lobbying groups and resulting improvements to the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Still, many families of students with unique needs remain dissatisfied with the traditional public school options available to their children (Lake, 2010).

Adding public schools of choice to the mix offers a profound opportunity to find a better way to serve these students' needs. Public schools of choice with enhanced autonomy, such as charter schools, magnet schools, and alternative schools, offer districts a new way to meet these students' needs. Choice and autonomy can be:

- A tool to create new schools that are designed from the start to serve students who do not fit the traditional model of public schooling
- A way for districts to experiment with innovative approaches to serving students with special needs
- An avenue to create more options for families who struggle to find an appropriate fit for their children's special learning needs
- A way to better encourage district schools to move away from rule- and compliance-based approaches to serving special needs to an educational approach focused on outcomes and school-based accountability

But there are real challenges to achieving such opportunities and some risk that students with special needs will actually be worse off under a broader system of choice than they were without it. Schools of choice, for example, have been criticized for informally excluding students with unique needs or serving them poorly. Districts moving to a broader school choice system need to minimize the risks to students with unique needs, while using the opportunity to dramatically improve the options and outcomes for the public school system's students with the greatest needs.

SPECIAL NEEDS IN CHOICE REGIMES: A VARIED PICTURE

As with other outcomes associated with school choice, there is tremendous variation in how choice schools have served students with special needs. One can find charter schools for students on the autism spectrum, or charter schools for blind students, or charter schools with nearly 100 percent of their students on an IEP. Other charter schools have almost no students with identified special needs.

The same is true of traditional district schools. In most school systems, populations with special needs vary widely across schools because districts tend to create specialized programs to serve different populations. In Seattle, for example, the school district provides self-contained classrooms at certain schools for students with emotional and behavioral problems, autism programs at other schools, programs for students with profound disabilities at other schools, and inclusion programs at still other schools. There are designated schools for English language learners and some schools that offer no programs at all for students with special needs.

Averaged together, charter schools in most states tend to serve a fairly representative or slightly lower number of students with special learning needs. The reasons for the lower rate are not clear. Though some charter schools likely "counsel out" or exclude students with special needs, there is no evidence that they do so more frequently than traditional district schools (Lake, 2010). It may be that parents of students with special needs are simply less likely to send their children to a charter school or other choice school.

There is also some evidence that charter schools are less likely than district schools to identify incoming students with special-needs labels and are more likely to move students off of IEPs (Lake, 2010). One notable charter school has

a philosophical approach that there are no learning disabilities, only teaching disabilities. The school aggressively addresses learning deficits early on so that students no longer need IEPs. Other charter schools create individualized instruction plans for all students, so parents of students with special needs are less inclined to require formalized IEPs. These varied approaches to categorizing students, then, make basic statistical comparisons less meaningful.

More in-depth studies about how schools of choice meet the needs of students with special needs are hard to find. Those that exist tend to focus on specific locales or schools, making it difficult to generalize from these examples. A few broad findings do seem to emerge, however:

- Compared to traditional schools, charter schools appear to have special education populations weighted more heavily toward students on the autism spectrum and students with learning disabilities (Lake, 2010).
- Charter schools are less likely than traditional schools to serve students with low-incidence (profound) special needs.
- State and locales vary in how they select, fund, and oversee schools of choice. Such factors likely play a significant role in explaining variation in outcomes, including provision of special needs.
- Many charter schools can be considered models for innovative approaches to educating students with special needs.

More research is needed to cull lessons about how schools of choice address specialized needs of students, but the overall implication from research is that schools of choice, like other public schools, appear to unevenly serve students with IEPs, students with limited English proficiency, and other identifiers. Some broad trends point back to the idea that schools of choice offer both risk and great opportunity. The question is how the government agencies that oversee the schools can address weaknesses and risk.

THE CHALLENGES OF CHOICE

The central challenge for districts trying to promote school choice and ensure that the district's students with the greatest needs are served well is that the federal and state safeguards and funding mechanisms that are in place to establish rights and services for these students were designed with a traditional school system in mind. These safeguards and funding mechanisms assume a set of

rules and processes based on traditional district structures and capacities, and they establish a system of rights based more on compliance with established processes, such as following an IEP, than on achievement of outcomes.

A fundamental assumption in federal and state regulation is that the government body responsible for receiving funding and providing "free and appropriate public education" for students with special needs—the legal requirement in IDEA—is the school district, also called the local education agency (LEA) (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 29 U.S.C. §794, 1973). Within a district, in the case of students who qualify for special education services, an individual school does not have any obligation to meet every child's needs; rather, the district is required to provide an appropriate education for that student somewhere. If the district cannot provide an appropriate option, the LEA is obligated to pay for the costs of private or even home-based schooling.

Schools of choice are often organized as their own LEAs, meaning that they are the equivalent of a district for the purpose of federal special education regulations. In that case, the charter school is legally responsible for meeting the need of every student who attends the school, regardless of disability. The school is also then responsible for federal and state reporting requirements, many of which can be quite complex. Acting as an LEA may bring legal clarity, but it creates financial and legal responsibilities that some charter school operators do not understand or are ill prepared to handle. Without multiple schools with which to share the costs for students with special needs, the enrollment of one student with profound disabilities could send a charter school into a financial tailspin.

In other cases, charter schools are considered part of the school district for the purpose of special education and are not their own LEAs. In those schools, the legal responsibility for providing an adequate education rests with the school district. Such charter schools typically receive special education services from their district, just like any other district school. The advantage for the charter schools is that they have more flexibility to work with the district to place students whom the school leaders feel they cannot serve well. Many charter schools make a strong case that they are, by design, oriented around a specific mission and approach that may not be appropriate for every student. However, charter schools in this "dependent" status often complain that they are not happy with the quality or amount of special education services they receive from the district. Non-LEA

status also can confuse accountability when a district believes a charter school should share some responsibility for the district's students with special needs, but the charter school views special education as a district concern.

School choice systems naturally create a barrier for vulnerable students and their families because the systems require an extra effort to select and apply for a school. Even when parents understand that they have a choice to make (which is by no means obvious to everyone), they must rely on the messages they receive from schools to inform their decision. Families of students with special needs may find themselves getting an intentional or unintentional message that their children are not welcome.

To further complicate access, student transportation is not always provided by charter schools or district alternative schools, and charter schools often do not have access to state or local transportation funds. This may be a particular concern for students with severely disabling conditions, as the lack of transportation may violate IDEA's equal access provisions. A similar issue arises with facilities: Not having access to state and local capital funds, charter schools tend to locate in nontraditional school buildings, some of which may not comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Taken as a whole, these issues create a difficult set of incentives for schools of choice. Though charter schools typically have missions to serve at-risk students, the liability and costs associated with educating students with special needs and English language learners are high, while the financial incentives are low. Charter schools receive additional funding for students with special needs, but the amount is usually calculated at a statewide average rather than in a way that corresponds to differentiated levels of disability. So a charter school that serves a student with profound disabilities, requiring services that cost about $250,000 per year, may receive only an additional $20,000 of state funding. There are strong incentives, then, for charter schools to avoid serving special education students with high needs. When charter schools avoid serving these students, traditional schools may feel that they are carrying a disproportionate share of the responsibility for students with special needs.

Choice for Students With Other Special Needs

New schools of choice, with targeted missions and, in many states, mandates to serve the lowest performing students, offer tremendous potential to provide focused programs to language-minority students and others requiring alternative education arrangements. But for choice districts, accommodating those students presents many of the same challenges as serving special education students.

Not all schools will work for these students. As well, resource allocation, accountability, and the pressure to meet enrollment numbers create disincentives for new school operators to invest in programs that will meet these students' needs. Informing parents, especially language-minority parents, about available choices and providing reasonable transportation and access to available schools pose familiar challenges. For districts, ensuring that quality programs are provided within diverse schools for these students is just as difficult as it is to monitor special education programs—perhaps even more so because there are fewer legal requirements to standardize oversight of alternative education programs.

Many of the proposed strategies for improving the provision of special education services—creating an ombudsman to guide families through the selection process, rethinking the distribution of resources, and rethinking who provides oversight and accountability for these programs—may also improve services to these other special populations.

MAKING CHOICE WORK FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

None of these barriers is a reflection of malicious intent on the part of school districts or schools of choice. Rather, the barriers are outcomes of a system of regulations and funding that does not reflect reality in most districts where choice, diverse providers, and outcome-based (as opposed to compliance-based) accountability is becoming the norm.

Still, there can be real implications for students if schools of choice act in an exclusionary manner. And there can be significant political fallout if schools of choice are perceived to be exclusionary. When such problems occur, the instinct of districts often is to fall back on simple solutions such as quotas or regulations to ensure that schools of choice are serving a representative number of students with special needs. Charter schools in some cities—including New York; Nashville, Tennessee; Denver; Hartford, Connecticut; and Rochester, New York—may soon be required to serve and retain percentages of students with special needs that are comparable to the district as a whole. New Orleans' Recovery School District is considering requiring all of its charter schools to maintain an enrollment of students with special needs within 75 percent of a distribution.

But as Parker Baxter (personal communication, January 2011), the former director of charter schools for Denver Public Schools, remarked on the topic, "There is danger in using traditional ideas to solve nontraditional problems."

A much more productive policy approach is for districts to view charter schooling as an opportunity to craft better public school solutions for meeting students' special needs. But this is a new frontier for school districts and the charter school community and requires innovative thinking. There are a number of such innovations underway in school districts around the country.

A variety of support structures can provide charter schools with the same types of supports district schools receive and should be thought of as a range of options available to stand-alone charter schools. Entities currently providing special education infrastructure support to charter schools include local districts, intermediate administrative units (such as intermediate school districts, education services centers, and boards of cooperative education services), cooperatives, local nonprofit organizations, and management organizations. In the District of Columbia, charter schools can join the DC Special Education Co-operative (2011), which provides training and consulting services to schools, consulting teachers and special education teachers, advocacy, and other supports.

Risk pools are another way charter schools can share the financial responsibility for students with special needs. As with an insurance policy, a charter school pays into the risk pool and draws out of it when a student with high needs enrolls in the school. Lauren Morando Rhim described in detail how risk pools work and noted that IDEA 2004 includes language and regulatory flexibility encouraging the creation of state special education risk pools (Lake, 2010). Rhim also noted that a risk pool has the potential to prepare a charter school to manage the potential heavy financial costs of a child who requires intense services and may diminish the incentive to counsel out children with greater special education needs.

Concerned that the Denver charter schools served lower rates of students with special needs, the city's school district decided to house a program for students with special needs in a charter school. New Orleans and Nashville are considering similar approaches. Districts could also consider requests for proposals for charter schools with a specialized focus on the types of disabilities that are more underserved in the district.

Many charter school authorizers, including school districts, have dramatically improved their processes for assessing an applicant's plans for serving students with special needs before a charter school is approved. Authorizers also have learned, sometimes the hard way, the importance of monitoring and auditing charter schools to ensure they are taking proper procedural steps when students are identified as eligible for special education. Nashville and New Orleans, for instance, are working to create more transparent and publicly accessible data on exceptional students.

Some districts, such as Denver, are working on ways to provide charter school staff access, at cost, to the same special education training available to personnel at district-run schools. Denver also is working to allow charter schools more say about the assignment, supervision, and evaluation of district employees who work in or provide special education services to charter schools.

New Orleans' Recovery School District has committed to advocate for local and state funding policies that provide requisite resources for serving students with special needs. Los Angeles Unified School District has committed to work with charter schools to jointly develop and bring forward for district and state approval a plan that reorganizes current special education structures, allowing for "autonomy, flexibility, and accountability."

Other ideas, yet untried, also may hold promise for school districts that are seeking a new path for charter schools and special education. As more districts engage in problem solving about this issue, there are a number of questions district staff can begin asking of themselves and the charter schools in their midst to develop solutions that fit their community.

WHO IS THE ADVOCATE FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS?

Should all schools serve all students, or should there be specialization? Is the district responsible for ensuring all students have viable options? When some local specialization of services is needed, someone must help families navigate these options. A districtwide ombudsman, whose job is to counsel parents of students with special needs about the available options and the rights they have within the schools they choose, can fill this role.

IS THE DISTRICT A REGULATOR, A PROVIDER, OR BOTH?

In most choice districts, the district serves as both the provider of special education and the regulator who ensures that services are being provided. It is fair to ask whether this is an optimal arrangement. Should the agency responsible for ensuring that students are being appropriately served in district and charter schools be the same agency responsible for providing the majority of services to students with special needs? Is there a way to separate these functions so that service providers, be they district or charter schools, are being overseen by the same independent agency?

SHOULD THERE BE COMMON DISCIPLINE POLICIES?

Though relevant to all students, discipline policies are of particular concern when it comes to students with IEPs related to behavioral issues. Charter schools have been criticized for exercising particularly strict discipline policies that result in high numbers of student expulsions—an outcome that could disproportionately impact some students with special needs. This criticism has led some districts to wonder whether there should be a common discipline policy across district and charter schools.

DO FINANCIAL INCENTIVES NEED TO BE ADDRESSED?

Co-ops and risk pools can address some of the disincentives for charter schools to provide special-needs services, but it is worth exploring whether the policies governing the distribution of special education funding should be adjusted. Should states consider creating a statewide fund for serving students with low-incidence, exceptionally high needs, in essence assuming responsibility for these expenses instead of the LEAs? Should states consider adjusting facilities funding to account for building-accessibility costs for students with special needs?

WHO HAS LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY?

What legal status do charter schools in this community have (as LEAs or as a part of the district), and what are the implications for the school's responsibility to meet federal and state special education requirements?

Special education is a big vulnerability for schools of choice and an issue that districts have to get right, especially when they are rolling out new school choice initiatives. One lawsuit or scathing newspaper story about a student's special needs not being met can create serious political difficulties and can even carry financial penalties. There is also a moral imperative. Even if districts have charter schools in their geographic region that operate as independent LEAs, a collection of district and charter public schools in a city or a region probably has some communitywide responsibility to ensure the welfare of the most vulnerable students. As the research demonstrates, there is no obvious culprit for the problems that arise when special needs meet school choice, and there are no simple solutions. Finding ways to ensure choice schools effectively serve students' unique needs will require creativity and persistent problem solving. But those labors will surely be worth the effort if choice can fulfill its promise to better serve students who typically face limited options today.

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Chapter 5

For Charter Schools and School Districts, Empty Space Equals Opportunity

Parker Baxter

Charter schools and other autonomous public schools of choice have long been viewed by most American school districts as a drain on their resources and a threat to the well-being of the system. Rather than embrace these schools as partners in a shared endeavor, traditional school districts typically have adopted a posture of opposition or, at best, indifference (Hinman, 2009). During the past decade, however, as schools of choice have gained prominence in the media and among politicians, an alternative approach has emerged. In several cities across the country, district leaders are abandoning the monopoly model that has characterized American public education for generations in favor of a system in which great schools are replicated, bad schools are closed, and innovative models are encouraged. The portfolio management model emphasizes choice, autonomy, equity, and accountability for results (Hill, Campbell, Menefee-Libey, Dusseault, DeArmond, & Gross, 2009).

Although the experience of each of these "portfolio districts" is as unique as the cities themselves, common among the districts is a willingness to use public resources in unconventional ways to lower the cost of change. Instead of using their control of public funds and facilities to maintain a failing status quo, as so many urban school systems have done for decades—and as many still do today—portfolio districts use public resources strategically to adapt to changing needs and incentivize public competition and innovation (Lake & Hill, 2009).

Whereas traditional school districts think of school buildings as fixed institutions, portfolio districts see the buildings as public assets that can be reconfigured to best fit ever-changing needs (New Visions for Public Schools, 2005). Several portfolio districts have found ways to reduce excess facility capacity and generate new revenue while at the same time incentivizing new school development. Shared facilities, or "co-located schools," can turn empty space into new opportunities (Haimson, 2010).

USING PUBLIC FACILITIES AS STRATEGIC ASSETS

A traditional school district that hopes to transform itself from a monopoly operator into a portfolio manager must be willing to change how it manages its resources. In a traditional district, nearly all resources—facilities, transportation, technology, supplies, and even teachers—are allocated and managed centrally. The focus in such a system is on maximizing the size of the system and perpetuating its existence. In a portfolio district, funds follow individual students directly to individual schools, and schools are responsible for allocating funds to serve students' needs. In a portfolio district, as Paul Hill (2006) wrote, the "students, not the system . . . become the primary organizing principle for educational policies—and, more importantly, for schools themselves."

Across the country, urban school districts have thousands—and in some cases tens of thousands—of excess seats, which means dozens of vacant and half-empty school buildings and millions of dollars in wasted maintenance costs (Woodall, 2011). In a growing number of cities, those underutilized buildings have been opened up for use by new schools, even those schools not operated directly by the school district.

For some traditional school district leaders, the idea that a district would offer to sell or lease its unused buildings to charter schools is "ridiculous at best," as Milwaukee School Board President Michael Bond, whose district has 27 vacant school buildings, recently said. "It's like asking the Coca-Cola Company to turn over its facilities to Pepsi, so Pepsi can expand and compete with the Coca-Cola Company" (Richards, 2011).

Leaders of portfolio districts take a different view. The purpose of a portfolio district is not to dominate the market with a single flavor of schools at the expense of other choices but rather to create a diverse variety of excellent educational options for all students regardless of who provides the options. It does not matter to the leader of a portfolio district whether students attend a district school or a charter school. What matters is whether those schools are producing good outcomes for students. Joel Klein, former chancellor of New York City's public schools, summed up this point of view well when he said, "People in the school don't own the building. The people who own the building are my 1.1 million children, who are entitled to an equitable crack at a great education" (Meyer, 2008a).

Beginning with pioneers such as New York City and Chicago almost a decade ago, the number of cities in which districts are opening up previously vacant and underutilized facilities to new charter schools continues to grow. Even cities that previously have rejected this approach are changing course. Only a few years ago, the St. Louis Board of Education made headlines by including charter schools along with liquor stores in a list of entities banned for 100 years from purchasing vacant school buildings. Recently, however, Superintendent Kelvin Adams announced a new portfolio-oriented reform strategy, "Creating Great Options," which explicitly encourages the development of new, district-authorized charter schools by offering them space in district facilities (Crouch, 2011).

Beyond Buildings

Portfolio districts don't just share buildings with charter schools; they also share resources and services. Examples include:

- Creating a shared transportation system to ensure equitable choice throughout a city
- Offering district-operated food services to charter schools to ensure they can provide federally subsidized meals to students in poverty
- Distributing federal and state grant funds to all schools on a per-pupil basis
- Offering specialized professional development to all schools that choose to purchase it
- Sharing access to a pool of specialized personnel to ensure that all schools can provide services to students with special needs
- Providing all schools access to district data systems
- Creating a unified school accountability system to ensure that all schools are held to the same performance standards

LESSONS FROM DENVER

The experience of Denver Public Schools (DPS) during the past five years presents a vivid example of how a school district that is willing to think differently about its mission and resources can leverage new and existing public facilities to create a thriving market for new public schools of choice.

Denver, whose charter school office I directed until early 2011, has a long history of using public dollars to support the development of new, autonomous public schools. The Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning, one of Colorado's first autonomous public schools of choice and a partnership between five metropolitan school districts, has been housed in a former DPS elementary school for almost 20 years. In 2004, the district used bond funds to construct a new 800-student K–8 facility

and agreed to lease it to Omar D. Blair Charter School, now one of the district's most successful schools. Also in 2004, DPS agreed to invest $5 million in bond funds to help build the Denver School of Science and Technology, a nationally recognized charter middle school and high school from which every graduate is accepted at a four-year college.

But Denver only began implementing portfolio management as a districtwide reform strategy in 2007. In April of that year, a study by the Rocky Mountain News and the Piton Foundation, conducted with the district's cooperation, found that, as in many urban districts across the country, a quarter of the city's school-age children did not attend a DPS school. Denver had lots of space in schools in some parts of town, while in other, growing areas, schools were at capacity. In some Denver communities, the study found, more than half of the eligible students took advantage of Colorado's open enrollment law to attend public schools in surrounding suburban districts. Enrollment in charter schools had increased 300 percent during the previous six years, while the district had more than 30,000 empty seats in its school buildings, a third of its total capacity (Mitchell & Hubbard, 2007).

Rather than ignore or try to downplay these dismal facts, Denver's board of education and then-superintendent Michael Bennet, who is now a U.S. senator, seized upon the facts as proof of the need for dramatic change. Together, they published a response in which they bluntly acknowledged the district's failings and called for systemic change. "It is hard to admit," they wrote, "but it is abundantly clear that we will fail the vast majority of children in Denver if we try to run our schools the same old way. Operating an urban school district in the 21st century based on a century-old configuration will result in failure for too many children. It is long past time to admit this" (Bennet & Denver School Board, 2007).

The board of education and superintendent offered a vision for a new kind of school district, one that would embrace school choice and competition both as a practical reality and a civil right. To create dramatic change, they argued, "we must insist that DPS no longer function as a one-size-fits-all, centralized, industrial-age enterprise making choices that schools, principals, teachers, and, most important, parents are in a much better position to make for themselves. We must unleash the creative energy of our entire city, and build an environment that propels everyone in our schools—students, parents, teachers, principals—to find their

own solutions, rather than assume DPS, alone, will find the right answers in time. DPS needs to function more like a partner, building capacity and leadership at the school level and serving as an incubator for innovation."

Throughout 2007, the district partnered with A+ Denver, an independent community commission made up of more than 100 Denver residents, including former mayors, community advocates, business leaders, parents, and teachers, to explore ways the district could reallocate resources to reduce waste and improve student performance. After poring over reams of data on enrollment trends, performance gaps, and financial conditions, an A+ Denver panel was blunt in its assessment: "DPS, in its current form, is failing. It's failing our students academically and it's failing our community. Business as usual cannot continue if the District is to both fulfill its educational mission and survive financially."

Six months later, using principles and criteria developed by A+ Denver as a guide, the board of education unanimously voted to close eight school buildings and create five new schools in existing buildings. The board also resolved to solicit proposals for the development of innovative and high-performing new schools that would begin to open in 2009 (Denver Public Schools, 2007).

Even after closing eight buildings, DPS expected to reduce its excess capacity by only 3,000 seats. The district still had at least 20,000 empty seats in existing buildings. Many of the district's comprehensive middle school and high school buildings were literally half empty in 2008—such as West High School, which had fewer than 1,000 students in a building built for 2,000—but with students to serve, the schools could not simply be closed (Mitchell, 2008b).

What initially seemed like a continuing problem quickly became an opportunity. In the spring of 2008, the district released the Call for Quality Schools, its first request for proposals for new schools. In response, the district received 19 letters of intent to apply. Suddenly it became obvious that DPS would get a significant number of new school applications, several of which were likely to be approved to open in the fall of 2009. The next question became: Where will these new schools be located?

The district did not want to reopen the buildings it had just closed, and it definitely did not want new schools to access the private real estate market, lest a new charter school open across the street from one of the district's half-empty middle

schools and draw away students. Moreover, the district needed to find a way to reduce the money it was wasting to maintain unused space in existing buildings, which cost an estimated $600 to $700 per empty seat (Meyer, 2008b).

New school applicants worried about where they could find space. As in communities across the country, in Denver one of the greatest obstacles to new school development, particularly for charter schools, was access to quality, affordable facilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Research by the Colorado League of Charter Schools (2008) showed that, in 2007–08, the state's charter schools were spending, on average, $480 per student out of their operating revenue on facility costs. Schools renting space in the private market were spending $536 per student, and the cost was even higher, $650 per student, for schools that privately purchased or built their own buildings. By contrast, Colorado charter schools fortunate enough to have access to district-owned buildings and land were able to spend much less of their operating revenue on their facilities, an average of $189 per student.

It did not take long for both the district and hopeful new school applicants to realize that what seemed like a liability—lots of empty space—was actually a great opportunity. Prodded by Denver's education reform community, particularly the Donnell-Kay and Piton foundations, DPS decided to offer space in underutilized district facilities at a fraction of market rates to new schools approved through the Call for Quality Schools process. New schools would get affordable space, while the district could reduce wasted operating costs and generate new revenue.

That spring, just as DPS was receiving applications from its first request for proposals, the district launched the Shared Campus Initiative. At the time, there was only one shared campus in Denver involving two programs, a district-managed school and a charter school. Today, almost three years later, there are nine shared campuses in DPS, housing more than 22 co-located schools and programs, including 14 new charter schools. Seven of those are replications of the district's most successful charter models. At the start of the 2011–12 school year, 18 charter schools—about half of the city's total—were operating in district facilities, 14 of them in a shared campus partnership.

STRATEGIC PREPARATION FOR SHARED BUILDINGS

One of Denver's early attempts at creating shared school buildings didn't even get off the ground. At the same time the board of education voted to close its first school buildings in the fall of 2007, district officials tried to partner with a newly approved charter school to locate in one of the district's under-enrolled comprehensive high schools. The district was not prepared for the strong backlash that resulted and eventually had to back down from the co-location plan.

This initial failure led the district to engage in a full year of research and planning before making another attempt. DPS officials traveled to New York City and Chicago to learn from those cities' experiences with shared facilities and brought school leaders and district administrators from both cities to meet with Denver principals and board of education members. At the time, Chicago had more than 40 schools and programs in shared facilities, while New York had more than 600. DPS publicized the positive experiences of both of these cities with co-locations and demonstrated to a skeptical public and to board members that it was a strategy that could bring new schools to Denver. Joel Klein told the Denver Post (Meyer, 2008a) at the time, "When I have buildings that are half-empty and an opportunity to place a school in there that may create different opportunities for kids in that community . . . that's what we do. Sure, you get some noise. Overwhelmingly, it's working. People made the adjustments, looked for the opportunities. That's what will happen in Denver as well."

One of the first lessons DPS staff learned from leaders in New York and Chicago was that significant investment was required to convert a building designed to house a single comprehensive school into a shared campus with multiple schools. In the fall of 2008, just as the Shared Campus Initiative was getting underway but a year before any shared buildings were opened for operation, Denver voters approved a $454 million bond issue, the largest ever requested or approved in Colorado. The bond issue included $20 million earmarked explicitly to cover the costs of retrofitting existing school buildings to share space with new schools (Mitchell, 2008a). DPS has used these funds for physical changes to buildings—such as new fire doors to divide long hallways between two schools or a second set of administrative offices—as well as for extensive visual branding of each school on the shared campuses.

Denver also learned from New York and Chicago that shared campuses had to be created deliberately, with careful planning and collaboration with internal and external stakeholders. Shared campuses require central departments to operate in entirely new ways and to abandon the idea that a school defines a building, and vice versa. One of the steps DPS took early on that has been critical to the early success of the Shared Campus Initiative was the creation of the Office of School Innovation and Reform (OSRI). Originally created as the New Schools Office to manage the district's Call for Quality Schools process, OSRI is also responsible for recommending and creating shared campus facilities.

OSRI convenes a cross-functional and interdepartmental project management team responsible for facilitating the creation of shared campus building teams at each site, which include school leaders, the facility manager, and other school staff and which meet regularly to coordinate schedules and address problems. Individual school leaders are empowered with solving their own conflicts at the building level, but OSRI assists leaders in creating effective building teams through a memorandum of understanding process and the formation of a site-specific shared campus plan. That plan includes a detailed listing of which spaces are assigned to each school and which are shared, the entrances and exits for each school, and general physical plant guidelines, such as building opening and closing times.

The Agreement on Shared Campuses

School leaders on shared campuses in Denver must sign a memorandum of understanding that outlines the following guiding principles:

- We believe that building sharing can have positive benefits and need not distract from every school's primary goal of educating every child.
- We believe it is for the mutual benefit of the school leaders to contribute jointly to the administration of the campus and to work cooperatively in its operations.
- We believe that each student, family, and community member connected to a school should have appropriate access to the publicly owned building facility in which the school(s) are located.
- We believe there should be equitable access to educational spaces within a building facility based upon the number of students enrolled in a school and the mission of these schools.
- We believe the autonomy and identity of each individual school is important to the success of that school and the campus as a whole.

The outreach to New York and Chicago also touched on school culture issues. Denver leaders were encouraged to create separate identities for each school, complete with different logos, colors, and bell schedules. Principals, they were told, should have equal say in building decisions, even if one co-located school had 500 students and the other had only 70 students (Mitchell, 2008b).

In addition to seeking out best practices from other cities, DPS also began what is now an annual process, the Strategic Regional Analysis (SRA). SRA, a comprehensive review of enrollment, performance, and capacity trends in each region of the city, is used by district staff and the board of education to make decisions about which school programs should be considered for replacement by new schools, where new schools are needed, and which district buildings are appropriate for co-location (Meyer, 2010; National Association of Charter School Authorizers & IFF, 2010).

To create the public will for the kind of significant change that the creation of a shared campus involves, districts need to engage communities early and often throughout the process. In particular, they need to engage those parents who otherwise would go unheard and give them a voice in proposing and selecting new options for their children. In Denver, the district's partnership with A+ Denver played a key role in creating independent pressure for change and in fostering the idea that all of Denver's children need access to great public schools regardless of whether those schools are district-managed schools or charter schools. Likewise, groups such as Metro Organizations for People and *Padres y Jovenes Unidos* have been instrumental in organizing students and parents to call for new schools.

Any city considering shared school buildings to incentivize the creation of new schools will need to approach this issue differently, but in Denver, a tight approach to managing the supply of both facilities and new schools has been critical to the initiative's early success. DPS has used its exclusive right to authorize new charter schools and its ownership of district facilities to closely manage the market for new schools. The district manages the timing and location of new schools by offering new school applicants that follow the district's timeline a guaranteed space in a facility of the district's choosing should their application be approved. This close control has been a source of some tension between the district and the city's education reform community from the beginning, but in light of the results thus far it is difficult to imagine that a less rigorous approach to market management would have resulted in better supply of new schools.

MEASURING SUCCESS IN DENVER

It is still too early to judge the success of Denver's Call for Quality Schools and its Shared Campus Initiative, especially in terms of the impact on student achievement. Last year, the district's highest and lowest performing schools were both created through the new school process, and both were housed on shared campuses (Mitchell, 2010). In terms of creating a robust, collaborative, and competitive market for new, autonomous schools of choice, however, the impact of these reform initiatives is impossible to ignore. District-owned buildings that only a few years ago had thousands of empty seats are now full of students, thanks to new schools, including replications of Denver's most successful models.

The district is getting national attention for a new 35-acre, multibuilding "college-style" campus opened in 2010. The campus is designed to house multiple educational programs, including the first replication of Denver School of Science and Technology, as well as SOAR Charter School (K–5), Hope Center (early childhood), and Vista Academy (a district-operated multiple-pathways center for Grades 6–12). Schools were chosen for the campus through the Call for Quality Schools process, and the facility was constructed using $43 million in voter-approved bond funding.

After decades of decline, the district's enrollment has increased by 5,000 students in the past three years. Nearly 20 new schools and a dozen shared campuses have been created since 2007. Only time will tell whether those schools will be successful. Surely, though, in a city where thousands of children still lack access to a high-quality school, new schools are more promising than empty space.

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Chapter 6

A New Path to Rapid Reform for Districts and States

Matt Candler

For generations, eight states in the Southeast—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee—have comprised the poorest and most poorly educated region in the United States. On average, those states rank 42nd in wealth and educational attainment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Leaders in the Southeast shoot high by aiming to hit the regional average. Instead, they should be aiming to be the best in the nation.

And they can be the best in the nation. No region has greater potential for rapid improvement. Flexible right-to-work labor laws allow reform to scale faster. Large installations of human capital providers such as Teach For America (TFA) can fuel new schools. Bold leaders in Louisiana and Tennessee have set examples that others are beginning to follow.

My colleagues and I are taking on that challenge with a new organization called 4.0 Schools, a regional school reform accelerator dedicated to thoughtful but aggressive transformation within the southeast United States. We think our organization can be a model for districts and regions that face similar challenges in growing effective new schools. The 4.0—a perfect grade point average—represents the pinnacle of individual student achievement in college. That is our hope for students who graduate from our schools. For the organization itself, 4.0 also represents a belief in continuous improvement rather than instant perfection.

During the past 13 years, the members of 4.0's founding team, as part of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) foundation development team and two school development organizations that we cofounded in New Orleans and New York, have helped more than 250 new schools open their doors. These experiences have reinforced our commitment to quality, in existing schools and in schools that are still in the pipeline. At 4.0 Schools, we pair an informed and deliberate approach with aggressive predictions for growth—a combination that has the potential to

transform public schooling in the Southeast and serve as an example to other regions across the nation. We will do our best to open great schools in communities that badly need them.

But 4.0 Schools is more than a bunch of new schools. Designed and led by veterans of our nation's best charter schools and human capital reform shops, the organization represents an informed evolution in school reform. Instead of training single school leaders, we will train teams. Instead of letting schools struggle through critical, early years alone, we will support them closely for three years. Instead of keeping every school under our management tent forever, we will help close the very worst schools, leave good schools on their own, and then focus on boosting the long-term impact of our very best schools. Our best schools will scale under their own power to play a variety of roles in reform, based on what they can do best. Some will replace the worst schools in their city. Others will scale up by launching more schools, as charter management organizations (CMOs) do now. Others will spin out efficient back-office service providers or new learning technology ventures that further accelerate regional reform. We will remain at their side to train their talent as these schools grow.

Our approach is focused on preparing communities for new schools, developing the talent needed to staff the schools, supporting that talent through teachers' vulnerable first years, and ensuring that only the highest quality schools continue.

PREPARING THE SOIL

Before we commit large resources in a market, we must ensure the conditions for long-term reform are in place. We will place our own staff in target markets to identify high-quality talent for roles on boards and within schools. Staff members also will ensure that policymakers maintain the right conditions for reform. The following are on our list of necessary criteria:

- A strong charter law that provides equitable funding and freedom from collective bargaining
- Free or extremely low-cost space
- Local leaders who are willing to spend considerable political capital
- Local philanthropists who are willing to spend money to open new schools and close bad schools
- A previous commitment to TFA or The New Teacher Project (TNTP)

We intend to build the most effective leadership training program and support network ever developed. But we will still need great people coming in the front door. After trying many new tactics in national campaigns for KIPP and New Schools for New Orleans, we have learned how to create a message that resonates with promising talent. We will manage an aggressive national campaign like TNTP's wildly successful teachNOLA (teachNOLA Teaching Fellows, 2011). We will host citywide and web-based events for anyone interested in school reform in the Southeast. We will provide cash incentives to individuals and schools who send talent to our program.

Many aspiring educators have a tough choice when picking a CMO or a fellowship. We provide aspiring leaders a community as tight as a CMO with the flexibility some CMOs discourage. We want our successful folks to leave the nest and try harder things. We also will provide an aggressive salary package of at least $90,000 for school leaders during their fellowship year—a sum that goes further in the Southeast than in the higher-cost cities where most CMOs are growing.

Our approach offers four distinct routes to leadership: school leader, business and operations, instructional lead, and data lead. Successful founders will be called to solve complex, difficult problems we do not yet even know how to define.

WORLD-CLASS TRAINING FOR FOUNDING TEAMS

We are launching the 4.0 Academy, the country's most demanding school leader program. By investing in teams instead of in a single school founder, the 4.0 Academy leadership training takes to the next level what KIPP and Building Excellent Schools have done. We also are making training more realistic and support more structured through constant simulations, real-time feedback, and practical management tools we have collected from great schools across the country. We will place only leaders who have what it takes to build a tremendous school. We will plan for 10 to 20 percent of those participants who start the training to not "make it."

Each school team will begin with the school leader, who will train for at least one year full time in the Academy. The leader of finance and operations at the school will receive six months of training alongside the school founder. Two more leadership team members who are focused on instruction and schoolwide data will receive at least three months of training.

We will constantly place candidates in simulated situations to act out how school leaders might handle specific situations. Intensive summer classroom sessions will teach leadership and change theory from a business school perspective. Classroom instruction will be combined with participation in student and teacher orientation at high-performing charter schools in New Orleans. Leaders also will become fluent in Doug Lemov's (2010) Taxonomy of Effective Teaching Practices.

During the training year, the school leader will be an employee of our organization. Boards of directors will hire the school leader once the leader has completed the Academy and implemented the start-up checklist.

THE TRENCHES: SITE-LEVEL SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

To ensure we have enough control over school leaders, we will execute a licensing agreement with the founding board of each school before the school opens. Tied to that agreement will be a low-interest loan to the school to cover the costs of post-opening, start-up support. Board members must include in their charter application a signed commitment to participate.

School leaders, board members, finance and operations managers, and instructional and data leaders will each receive detailed feedback based on site visits and data collected through interim student assessments. Our staff and trusted expert consultants will begin visiting schools and providing feedback on the first day of student orientation. Leaders will visit exemplary schools throughout the school year. Experienced financial consultants will work closely with school finance and operations directors during the first few months. Additional consultants will observe board meetings during the first year of school and provide written feedback to boards, including benchmarking data.

We think every school leader will make a bad hire. The best leaders will do something quickly about the bad hire. We will build a base of teacher candidates to help replace teachers who are not making progress. If a leader needs to make a staffing change, we will help them make the change legally and quickly.

Instead of us having full CMO-like responsibility for each school perpetually, our licensing agreement will allow a school to earn the autonomy to pursue additional reforms beyond running their first school. We will require each school to undergo a comprehensive review at the end of the third year to determine how strong their

school is and which reform paths they might consider in the future. Reviews will cover board governance, finance, operations, school culture, and instructional rigor.

Schools that do not meet our performance criteria will receive critical feedback and enter a one-year remedy period. These schools will have a chance to pass the exam in year four. Schools that do not meet our requirements for entry into the portfolio will be required to begin paying back a majority of their start-up support loan and will be removed from our support network. In extreme circumstances, we will cooperate with authorizers to support orderly closure of schools we have started, including orderly dissolution of assets and placement for families into other schools.

AGGRESSIVE GROWTH FOR NEW SCHOOL EXPANSION

Schools will receive two key benefits if they pass our exam. A majority of their start-up support loan will be forgiven, based on a sliding scale related to their exam score. Schools also will be invited into an elite portfolio of schools that receive continued training and investment to replace existing low-performing charter schools or district schools, launch new schools, or spin out services or new tools to improve instruction or operations for other schools.

By providing time-limited support for a school's most critical early years and autonomy afterward for those who earn it, we maximize each school's reform impact. The 4.0 portfolio provides a broad political footing for reform by giving parents more choices and provides diverse pathways for entrepreneurial educators interested in the long term. The 4.0 portfolio builds critical connective tissue between our best schools and creates powerful incentives for schools to tackle greater challenges that fit their strengths. In particular, we see at least three specific paths that schools can follow once in the portfolio.

REPLACE LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS WITH EXPANDING SCHOOLS

Once a school enters the portfolio and expresses an interest in replacing an existing low-performing school, we will conduct a review of the team, the local district, and the human capital environment. We will assist schools in negotiating terms for replacement, provide early-stage funding, help secure larger growth capital, and provide additional training for team members leading expansion efforts.

Phased-in replacement is a technique we developed in New Orleans, the nation's most innovative reform community. New Schools for New Orleans worked closely with the state-led Recovery School District (RSD) to identify the lowest-performing K–8 schools in the city and then recruited leadership teams to launch new charter schools to serve the bottom three to four grades in those schools. These new schools received start-up funds from the federal government and the Walton Family Foundation. Meanwhile, RSD officials recruited a replacement principal for the remaining upper grades. This allowed RSD and the charter school to start fresh, with new leadership committed to the strategy.

After the first year of running both programs on the same campus, the RSD-operated school contracted by one grade to allow the new charter school to expand. This yearly step-back will continue until the charter school replaces the entire original school. Unlike many other takeover methods, this effort requires mutual commitment by both the district and the charter school operator. In extreme circumstances, we will explore portfolio schools taking over complete control of existing charter schools. These schools must be small; human capital must be available; and political support for takeover must be strong.

HELP SCHOOLS REPLICATE AS CHARTER MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

In some cases, local politics or lack of leadership within the district may prevent schools from pursuing replacement strategies, or school leaders themselves may be neither prepared nor interested in replacement. Another option, then, is more traditional expansion into a CMO—smaller and more nimble than many current CMOs—by adding three to seven new schools to existing schools. As with schools involved in replacement, leadership teams preparing to launch new sites will receive Academy training, negotiating help, and early-stage funding. We also will help secure larger growth capital from partners such as the Charter School Growth Fund.

LAUNCH ADDITIONAL REFORM TOOLS THAT ARE NOT NECESSARILY SCHOOLS

We think the next wave of innovation in K–12 will come from within high-performing independent charter schools like those we launch. For example, after Doug Lemov created his Taxonomy of Effective Teaching while at School

Performance in New York, the CMO Uncommon Schools served as both investor and laboratory for later-stage refinement. We believe there are many more tools like this waiting to be developed.

Some schools might be best suited to spinning out services such as back-office support to other schools. A great example of this is Charter School Business Management, started by Raj Thakkar, the former chief financial officer of Explore Charter School in Brooklyn. Thakkar saw a need for quality back-office support in other schools and proposed to Explore Charter School's founder that he start a new company while committing to serve Explore as his first client. This innovation expanded the impact of high-quality back-office practices to 100 more schools, while lowering Explore's costs of doing business.

A final example of investing in school-based entrepreneurs comes from New Orleans. Sci Academy, launched by a graduate of the New Schools for New Orleans fellowship, is the highest performing open-enrollment high school in the city. A teacher at the school, Jennifer Schnidman Medbery, worked in technology before teaching and while at Sci Academy found a better way to manage the growing stream of student-level data in the school. After creating an easy-to-manage database, Medbery thought other schools might want the same help. With encouragement from her principal and early-stage funding from the Idea Village, an entrepreneurial incubator based in New Orleans, Medbery launched Drop the Chalk to spread the technology (Fenn, 2011). Medbery, who has won every business competition she has entered, is currently serving 15 schools in New Orleans. Entrepreneurs in the 4.0 portfolio will receive similar early-stage support from an informed partner.

Whether our best schools expand to replace low-performing schools, add new sites, launch services, or build tools, our unique blend of intense training and support with long-term portfolio investing aims to catalyze unprecedented high-quality school reform across southeastern United States.

OUR GOAL: A REGION TRANSFORMED

Many local funders see courting or expanding KIPP as the answer to reform, but this approach comes at the expense of much-needed upstream investments in new school providers and reform tool developers. At best, KIPP can handle 5 to 10 percent of a midsize market's demand for better schools. For a market to have

enough high-quality new schools, more schools must be built locally. Large CMOs are unlikely to produce all the needed reform tools. We need comprehensive strategies to build the next generation of reform shops, and funders need encouragement to go down that path.

To date, national investments in local reform tend to stay focused on a few very large cities, with only a little attention to the occasional midsize market. A strategic approach to reform in midsized markets and rural communities can deliver much more impact than focusing only on the traditional large-scale battlegrounds of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. The 4.0 program can enhance current reform strategies by shifting some national resources into new school and service provider creation and proactively building pipeline capacity in midsize urban markets and rural communities.

Only five years ago, New Orleans was ranked dead last in student achievement in Louisiana, itself the nation's worst-performing state. Frederick Hess (2010), of the American Enterprise Institute, and two coauthors, Stafford Palmieri and Janie Scull, released a report that put New Orleans atop a list of U.S. cities that have developed "hospitable terrain for reformers." Within that terrain, 4.0's leaders have a dense network of high-quality schools and reform organizations to rely on for residency and training support.

We believe that a responsive system of independent, accountable schools can serve families better than an entrenched, calcified bureaucracy. If enough people commit to the same vision, the Southeast can move from the back of the pack to the front and set a standard for the rest of the nation.

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Chapter 7

Creating Savvy Choosers: Informing Families About School Choices

Paul Teske

School choice is meant to improve students' educational experiences, first by giving parents the opportunity to find the school that best suits their children's needs and interests and second by creating market-like pressure on schools and districts to provide the kind of high-quality schools that parents want. In addition, choice is expected to improve equity by allowing all students, regardless of income, to access schools in any of a city's neighborhoods.

However, none of these advantages can play out if parents do not exercise choice or if they make their decisions based on limited or poor information. Unfortunately, low-income and language-minority families tend to fall behind affluent families in their knowledge of and access to school choices. Low-income families especially face more of a burden when choice systems do not provide free transportation to schools.

Districts and charter schools simply need to try harder to make choice work for lower-income families. Affluent parents, because of greater flexibility in choosing where they live and a history of accessing private schools, may be well practiced in school choice. But choice is new to most low-income urban parents, and many of them do not have access to the Internet, where school districts place much of their information about school choice.

Because low-income families have limited access to social networks and to official information from schools and districts, they are less likely to know or fully understand their choices and how to access them. This is particularly true when parents must navigate systems with many types of choices—for example, charter schools and magnet schools in addition to traditional public schools—and when parents must begin the application process as early as nine months prior to actual enrollment.

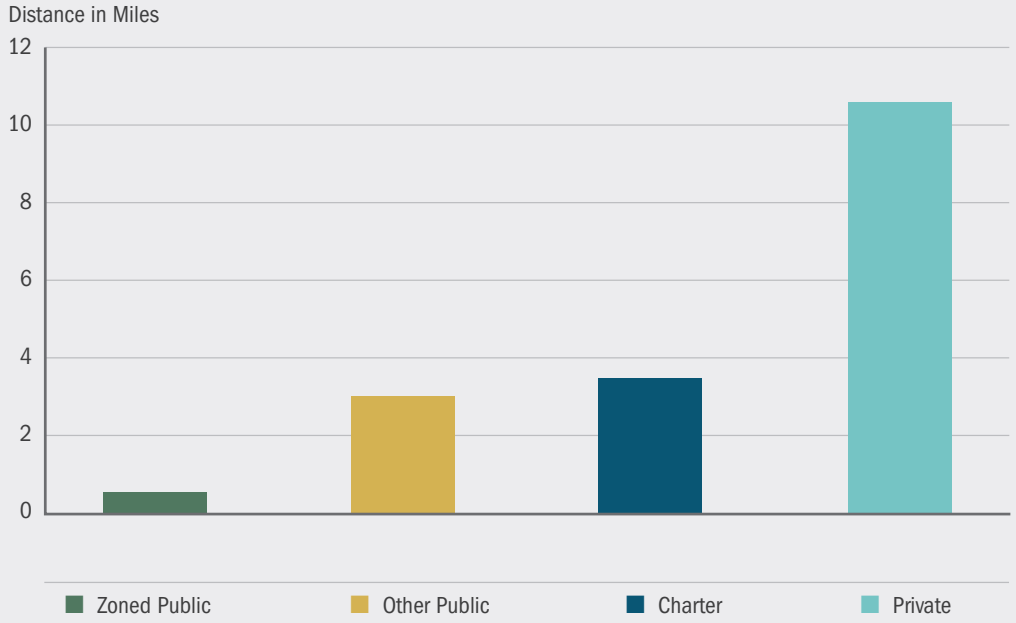
Even when low-income parents are aware of choice, some of the parents may lack the political efficacy to exercise their options. These parents may be concerned that they will not be able to effectively navigate the bureaucratic system, or they may be concerned that the system is rigged against them. These concerns are magnified for families with questionable immigration status.

All of this information suggests that districts that partner with charter schools have a major challenge on their hands. These districts need to do more than make choice available—they need to develop and implement a strategic plan to effectively reach and engage their low-income families (Buckley & Schneider, 2002; O'Brien & Appelbaum, 2008; Teske, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2007; Van Dunk & Dickman, 2004).

HOW DO PARENTS CHOOSE?

When choosing schools for their children, parents really consider only a handful of options (Schwartz, 2003). A survey of parents in Washington, D.C., found that 88 percent considered, at most, four schools (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007). Evidence indicates that, in Denver, parents considered even fewer schools. This is partly a factor of geography, as is evident from families who choose private and charter schools—parents certainly will send their children to a school that is farther away than their assigned school in the neighborhood (see Figure 1). But realistically, the costs of transporting children to schools can constrict choices, especially for low-income, single-parent, non-English-speaking families. A recent survey of families in Denver and Washington, D.C., found that one third of low-income parents would have chosen a different school for their child had transportation been provided (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & O'Brien, 2009). Not surprisingly, free transportation—and knowledge of these free options—increases the likelihood that parents consider more schools.

Figure 1. Modal Distance to School



Source: Teske, Fitzpatrick, and O'Brien (2009)

After narrowing for location, school-choice decision making follows a sort of hierarchy of needs. The most basic element of schooling—a safe environment—needs to be in place before students can learn. In many large urban districts, safe facilities have not been a given, so it is no surprise that low-income parents first assess security before anything else. Middle-income parents with children in more orderly, functional schools probably can skip ahead and look right to the next level of need, perhaps good test scores. Affluent parents in communities where test scores are high as a matter of course can focus on finding schools that help students achieve their full potential and develop as lifelong learners.

To aid families in this decision-making process, a district needs to provide three main types of information: information about the choice process, to equalize families' knowledge of how the system works; information about schools' environments and programs, to help parents determine which school will best fit their children's needs; and information about school performance, to help families hold schools accountable for outcomes.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE CHOICE PROCESS

School choice tends to be complicated and governed by many elements. Parents, especially those in communities where choice is relatively new, will need the district, and perhaps another entity, to help demystify the process. The district should provide parents with clear and comprehensive information regarding available options, enrollment timelines, application materials, overall rules, transportation, and the actual lottery or selection process.

INFORMATION ABOUT SCHOOLS' ENVIRONMENTS AND PROGRAMS

Universally, parents want to know what a school offers and how well their children will fit in at the school. A majority of parents in recent surveys say that they seek to match the programs or environment of the school with their child's own characteristics, rather than simply looking for a generic school with good test scores. The most important way to convey this information is through site visits that are open to both parents and children. Printed materials also are useful for getting a sense of what a school is like. Ideally, such materials need to be written in highly accessible language, with no complicated jargon.

INFORMATION ABOUT SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Providing parents with high-quality performance data is often seen as an important way to hold schools accountable. When parents are aware of a school's low performance, they put the pressure on the school by opting for a higher-performing school. Surveys from Washington, D.C., Milwaukee, and Denver suggest that parents making choices consider academic outcomes in their decisions (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007). When D.C. parents were asked why they made the choices they did, the largest proportion, 37 percent, said they chose their child's current school for reasons related to academic quality. In Denver, 49 percent of parents who chose a school other than their neighborhood school gave academic quality as the primary reason. By comparison, of the parents whose children remained in the neighborhood school, just 16 percent cited academic quality first.

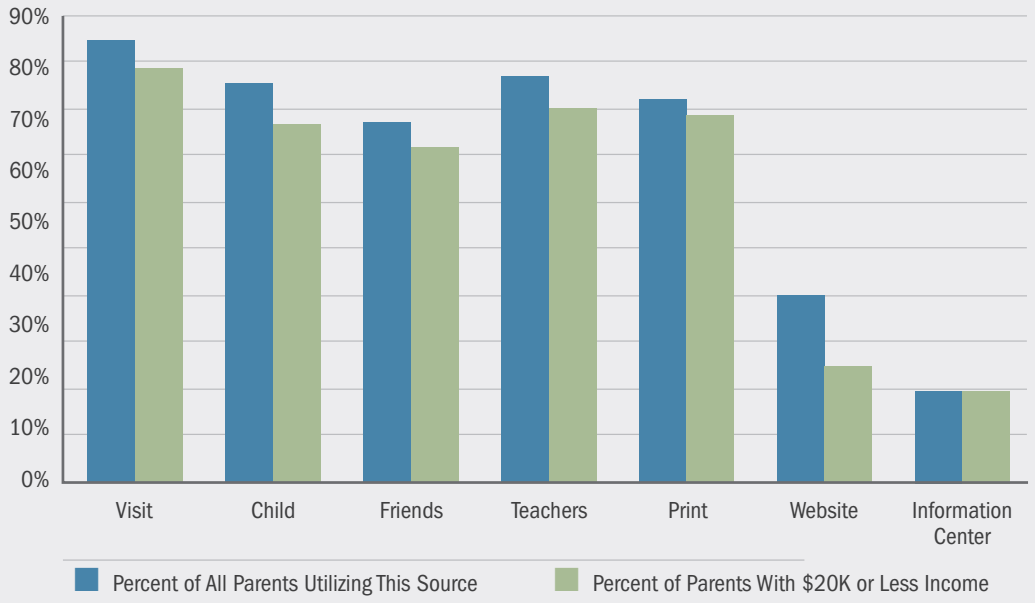
Evidence indicates that low-income parents make decisions based on school performance somewhat less often than do affluent parents. In Denver, Milwaukee, and Washington, D.C., parents who make $20,000 or below are 30 percent less likely than parents who make between $20,000 and $50,000 to say they made their choice based upon academic quality. They are about 20 percent more likely to cite school location as a key element of their decision (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007).

When parents do not have access to good performance information or do not fully understand ratings of school quality, they are more likely to select a new school that may not be an improvement over their prior school (Bell, 2005; Howell, 2006).

WHERE PARENTS GO FOR INFORMATION

When approaching school choice, most parents rely on "soft" sources of information—conversations with parents, teachers, and principals and their intuitive feelings about schools—rather than on hard data such as test scores or demographics. Reputation, word of mouth, and school visits are by far the most important sources for most parents. In one survey, more than 80 percent of parents reported visiting schools, and nearly 80 percent of them brought their children with them. During these visits, parents want to have time to talk to other parents, teachers, and principals. More than 75 percent of parents reported discussing the school with teachers (Teske et al., 2007). As well, parents talk about schools with people in their social networks and read printed information about the school. Far fewer parents use web-based materials and parent information centers (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Information Sources



Source: Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan (2007)

When parents access more sources of information, surveys show, they are more satisfied with their school choice. This bodes poorly for low-income parents, as evidence indicates that the information networks available to low-income parents are smaller and less informed than the networks available to affluent parents (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2009). Networks are particularly important because parents report that they put more trust in school information they get from personal interactions than from printed information—especially interaction with other parents, rather than school officials.

According to a 2010 Pew Research Center survey (Jansen, 2010), only 57 percent of Americans with annual incomes below $30,000 use the Internet, compared to 95 percent of Americans who make at least $75,000. This poses a growing problem, because districts are placing increasing amounts information and application materials regarding school choice processes online.

Districts should design their information strategies to reach parents where they naturally access information and to bridge the information gaps between low-income and affluent families.

BETTER WAYS TO INFORM PARENTS

The challenge for districts engaged in choice is to provide the guidance parents need in the forums that they will access and trust. The information parents seek is not encyclopedic—parents simply want to feel informed, not overwhelmed. But districts should provide information beyond just what parents seem to want. If parents are showing a primary interest in safety, the district should provide this information and more. Districts should help parents become good consumers of schools. Evidence indicates that parents, especially low-income parents, want some guidance making school decisions (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007).

There are some obvious places to start. Consolidate information about the various choice programs into one messaging tool. Publish this information in multiple formats in multiple languages. Offer family-friendly hours at information centers and, when relevant, staff the centers with bilingual counselors. To improve information that flows informally through personal networks, send representatives to venues where parents already congregate: churches, community organizations, and neighborhood events.

Consider the work being done by the Cambridge Public Schools in Massachusetts. Cambridge has a district-level plan to recruit students, especially to schools selected by a low number of families through the choice process (O'Brien & Hupfeld, 2009). Each family accesses the district via the Family Resource Center (FRC), the office responsible for student applications and registrations, which is open at convenient times. FRC staff participate in school fairs, assist each elementary school in developing marketing materials, conduct kindergarten information meetings at community locations such as public housing sites and community centers, coordinate appointments for parents to visit and tour schools, collaborate with an early childhood transition team, and advertise all informational meetings using a variety of mass media and websites.

CREATE COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Parents want guidance in making school choices but prefer that the guidance come via parents and local foundations instead of directly from the district. Districts should build partnerships with community organizations and try to make direct contact with parents in their neighborhoods, as officials in Minneapolis and Chicago have done. Given many parents' extensive reliance on word-of-mouth information, Chicago's Parents for School Choice campaign recruited volunteer parents to attend special events such as the New Schools Expo. In 2008, Chicago's Parents for School Choice introduced about 750 volunteers to schools opened under the Renaissance 2010 initiative and then sent out the volunteers to distribute fliers about school choice options and to visit community locations such as churches, laundromats, beauty shops, and other public venues in neighborhoods that have been underserved by traditional schools. In addition, Chicago has community transition advisory councils comprised of parents, community members, and local leaders who develop lists of guidelines about types of schools they would like in their neighborhoods, conduct outreach activities to deliver information to community members about the selection of new school operators, and host public forums to aggregate information about the choice process.

In Minneapolis, school district officials polled families and learned that 75 percent of the families had Internet access, which led to their creation of a school choice website to assist parents. But to reach the 25 percent of families who were not online and to assist all families in understanding their choice options, Minneapolis hired district parents to act as community liaisons. The liaisons, wearing

district-issued T-shirts and backpacks, knock on doors in their designated neighborhood, distribute flyers, participate in community events, speak at local churches, and answer parents' questions about school choice.

BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE BY BRINGING TOOLS TO PARENTS

While low-income parents are less likely to access web tools, much of a district's information regarding schools, school visit calendars, and application materials is presented online. In Portland, Oregon, officials bridged this gap by bringing web tools directly to parents. Portland Public Schools provides a detailed explanation of the lottery process on its website, which can be accessed in English, Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese, or Russian. Portland placed computer kiosks in every school and trained staff to assist parents with using the computers to access school choice information.

MAKE SCHOOL PERFORMANCE DATA CLEAR

Districts need to figure out how to present better school performance data to parents in all income brackets. Currently, this information often resides in online report cards, which are out of reach for many low-income families. Districts should make sure parents who are not familiar with the school system and the analysis that goes into the school system's performance ratings can make comparisons across schools. Some states, such as Florida, have boiled down school performance ratings to a single grade; other states have more complicated ratings. While simple grades might be easier to communicate, parents also might want to look at multiple factors, such as graduation rates and behavior data.

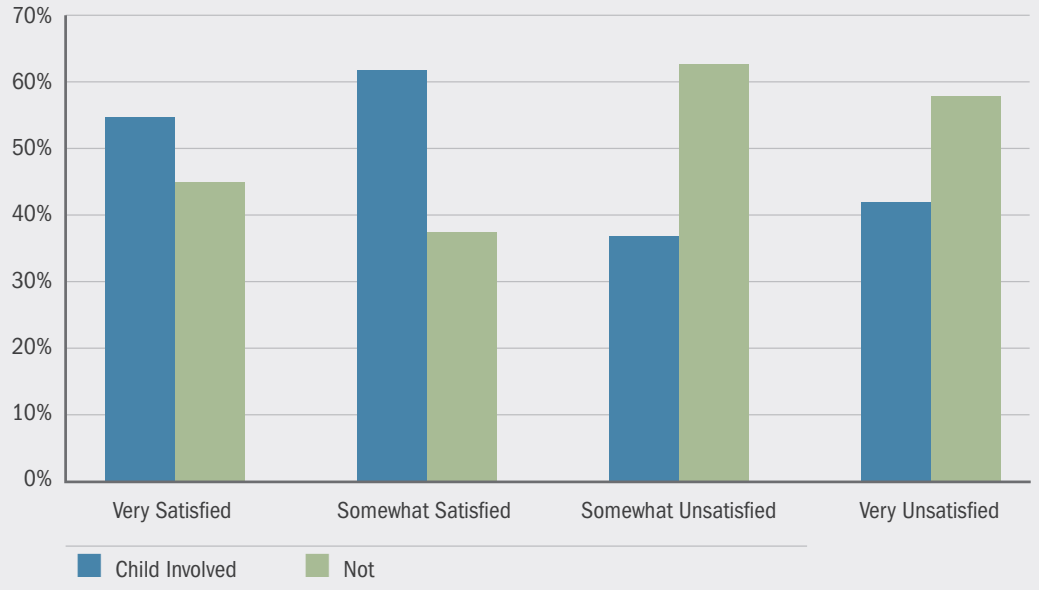
DEVELOP THE DEMAND FOR HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Because low-income parents may be new to school choice, it can take time and effort for them to become well-informed consumers of schools. Districts can help by hosting events organized around resources such as Picky Parent Guide: Choose Your Child's School With Confidence, a book by Bryan and Emily Hassel (2004) that includes simple checklists of what experts advise parents to look for in schools. Given that children are important players in their own school choices, districts also might teach middle and high school students about the choices they have and will face in coming years—training that also could be beneficial for the college selection process.

ENGAGE THE CHILD IN "FAMILY" CHOICE

We think about school choice as a parental decision, but in many cases children visit the choice options with their parents and play a critical role. In fact, research has shown parents are more satisfied with their school choice when their children were involved in the decision (Teske et al., 2007). High school students especially tend to have a strong say in choice decisions, as they consider options and factor in peers, reputation, afterschool activities, and other elements that children may know more about than their parents. In families in which English is not the first language, the child may be the family member most able to understand and navigate the choice system. School systems can provide choice materials and selection forms directly to students, increasing the chances the students will engage in the process and, in turn, enhancing the chances for parent satisfaction (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Satisfaction, By Involvement of Child



Source: Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan (2007)

ACTIVELY MARKET CHOICE IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

Districts may need to build excitement, via marketing and advertising, to get parents to realize the importance of making good school choices. Duval County Public Schools (DCPS), in Florida, shows how a district can build a message and

actively market the message to low-income families. In developing its magnet program, DCPS attempted to survey every district parent about school choice issues. The district asked parents about school themes and factors that might influence their choices and then used the information to create new magnet schools and to develop marketing materials. DCPS uses the slogan "Scream Your Theme!" to encourage schools to sell themselves and works with an outside marketing agency to produce brochures that outline the magnet options. Districtwide marketing focuses on two major events: Magnet Mania, a hugely attended magnet school fair held at the Jacksonville fairgrounds, and open houses for which eighth graders are bused to different high schools they are considering.

CHOOSING EXCELLENCE

School districts can make strategic and aggressive efforts to improve the quality and equity of information across families making school choices. But without the presence of good choices, these efforts will be wasted. Having more information about what is essentially a range of bad options is not going to help anyone very much.

In Washington, D.C., for example, fewer than one third of families that made a school choice in 2009 moved their child into a school that showed higher student proficiency levels than their previous schools (Schneider & DeVeaux, 2010). Denver, one analysis found, needs to add 36,000 seats—nearly half the capacity of the district, which now enrolls 75,000 students—in high-performing schools to provide enough good options (National Association of Charter School Authorizers & IFF, 2009).

In that regard, districts should encourage public policy that focuses on developing new, better options, including charter schools, located relatively close to the lower-income populations with the greatest need. School systems should pursue innovative transportation options so that more families choose schools based on quality rather than location and convenience. With more great choices and more useful, accessible information, school districts can improve satisfaction for parents and, most important, outcomes for students.

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Conclusion

Will District Collaboration Neuter or Propel the Charter School Movement?

Robin J. Lake*

> "We are the Borg. Existence, as you know it, is over. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Resistance is futile."
>
> —Star Trek: Voyager

The previous sections of this report lay out a strong case for charter–district collaboration. They outline a road map for tackling the toughest technical and philosophical issues that stand in the way of partnerships between organizations that have historically lacked any semblance of trust or goodwill. In the second chapter, Parker Baxter and Elizabeth Cooley Nelson make a case for why true collaboration is in the interest of school districts and charter schools. Who could be against collaboration?

But plenty of charter school leaders and supporters are wary of supporting districts that say they want to partner with charter schools or of creating charter–district collaboration compacts. Some charter school advocates and funders believe it's foolish to invest in district reform at all. Better, they argue, to put money and policy effort behind creating as many new high-quality charter schools as possible to replace the most dysfunctional district schools. Other advocates are hopeful that school districts can change but worry that district reforms will come at a severe price to the charter school sector, neutralizing the distinctiveness and autonomy that make charter schools effective. There is reason for skepticism and caution. This final chapter explores the charter school interest in charter–district collaboration. What are the possible risks? What are the rewards? And how can charter school leaders most productively move forward with partnerships?

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* Parker Baxter, Allison Demeritt, and Elizabeth Cooley Nelson contributed to this conclusion.

RISKS

Concerns among charter school leaders about collaborating with districts are not unfounded—for example, districts do have a terrible track record for following through with promised reforms. Typically, when superintendents push hard for reforms, local teachers unions (or others whose interests are threatened by the reforms) back slates of school board members who favor the status quo and fire the superintendent (Hess, 1998). Because districts typically control the dollars and buildings to which charter schools want access, there is also an inherent power differential that could cause charter schools eager to expand to make "desperation deals" to get more resources. Deals that look acceptable in the moment may later prove debilitating to long-term effectiveness.

For example, charter schools may decide to accept students based on neighborhood assignment zones rather than through a citywide lottery. While this may satisfy a district's desire to meet the needs of specific neighborhoods, the impact on a charter school could be profound if assigned students don't buy into the school's culture, rules, or instructional focus. Parent demands could create a quiet assimilation back into the risk-averse public schools that charter schools were meant to replace.

Even if deals like these work for one school or one group of schools, they may not work for other schools. The charter school community in any given city typically consists of a highly diverse set of schools. Some charter schools may be run by management organizations that need to expand to create economies of scale and that may need access to large, district-owned buildings. Other charter schools may be independent and are happy to operate one small school tucked into a mall or church. Some charter schools do not mind participating in district-accountability and teacher-training systems, while others eschew the district systems. In most cities, the racial diversity of charter school leaders also can be a divisive factor if white leaders are seen as collaborating with white district officials. Such diversity inevitably will result in different interests and concerns about district collaboration and has the potential to create deep schisms in the charter school community. Already, in some cities, conflicts are brewing between charter management organizations and stand-alone schools, between charter schools run by minorities and those run by whites, and between charter schools perceived as being high quality and those with poor test results.

There is also a risk that, in some districts, interest in collaborations will turn out to last only as long as current leaders remain in their positions, thus putting charter schools at risk of losing the advantages of collaboration once they've already made significant concessions. Less damaging, but perhaps more likely, partnership agreements could be used to convince funders that districts are reformist, but implementation might never move beyond superficial "best practices" conferences. The real promise of collaboration—shared resources and responsibility—might never be realized.

REWARDS

While charter schools have a lot to lose, they also have much to gain. For example, when it comes to sharing responsibility for students with special needs, even the perception that the charter school sector is not serving students equitably damages its reputation with policymakers. A charter–district agreement for an effective and equitable citywide approach to special education benefits both charter schools and students.

Moreover, the continued expansion of charter schools depends on access to facilities and more equitable financing. Without increased certainty of those resources, the sector will continue to post only modest gains in growth. To really become a force for serving dramatically more students nationwide, charter schools need to find another solution besides lobbying state legislators in the midst of a very tough economic climate. Negotiating local deals with districts may be a much more promising path toward dramatic growth of the charter school sector.

Another potential benefit to collaboration is avoidance of regulatory or litigious risk. If resources and responsibility are not mitigated through collaboration, they will likely be enforced through the state education agency and through lawsuits. For example, in New Orleans, where a lawsuit regarding special education is underway, charter schools are not party to the suit; the Recovery School District (RSD) is the defendant, but the court's decision will apply to charter schools. If charter schools had been in proactive conversations with the RSD to reach an agreeable plan for shared responsibility for students with special needs, perhaps charter schools would have been less vulnerable to a suit.

AVOIDING BAD DEALS

While it is in charter school leaders' interest to negotiate and collaborate, they risk coming out on the losing end, so they need to adopt strategies that might mitigate the risk for bad deals or insincere promises. The following strategies are adapted from "When David Meets Goliath: Dealing With Power Differentials in Negotiations" by Robert S. and Elliot M. Silverstein (2000).

WORK TO CREATE GOODWILL

Especially in cities with a history of vitriolic power plays between charter schools and districts, some charter schools may assume the worst of district negotiators. To overcome a lack of trust, some period of fence mending and sharing of goodwill is probably a necessary first step in new charter–district partnerships before substantive negotiations begin. Local charter school leaders who support collaboration could quietly suggest some of these efforts. Small but honest gestures from the district superintendent, such as the mention of charter schools as partners in closing the achievement gap, can go a long way toward this goal.

ASSUME THAT CHARTER SCHOOLS HAVE SIGNIFICANT POWER

Power arises from dependence and interests, fears, and availability of options, not legal status. Even when charter schools are negotiating with districts that also authorize and oversee them (an apparent power differential), charter schools should recognize that districts have at least as much to lose by sharing resources. Districts could lose board or community support if they are seen as taking resources away from specific schools or neighborhoods. Charter schools can responsibly leverage that power by offering to help calm community concerns in exchange for more resources.

ANTICIPATE WORST-CASE SCENARIOS

In some cases, districts will abuse uneven power even in well-intentioned partnerships. Charter schools may need strategies to counter this action, such as neutral third-party advisors or reviewers and, as much as possible, solidarity among charter schools. Clear and specific written agreements will also help. The collaboration compacts fostered by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation are a

start, but most compacts are aspirational and broad. Collaboration compacts need to be followed up with more specific, actionable, enforceable agreements that: outline two to four major strategies; identify the sequence of steps necessary to achieve clearly defined outcomes; establish who owns decision making for the key, and most contentious, aspects of the agreement; and detail the repercussions for failure to meet obligations. Agreements that allocate risk could be used to spell out, for example, what happens if one party does not follow through with implementation or who bears responsibility if special education costs for a charter school student exceed the per pupil allocation provided by the district. It is easy to agree on high rhetoric but less easy to agree on what "costs" will be paid for noncompliance. However, agreement regarding noncompliance is key for reassuring the less powerful party that collaboration is worth acceptance f the necessary risks involved.

MOVING FORWARD

Nobody knows how the nascent effort to overcome past hostilities will ultimately play out. Will large numbers of districts truly try to reform? Even if they try, will their leaders survive politically? Will local charter school leaders start undermining each other as they vie for district favors? Early indications, from work by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) to facilitate charter–district partnerships, point to reason for optimism, as districts and charter schools realize they have little option but to partner if they hope to achieve their mutual interest of advancing student achievement. At the same time, many of these partnerships seem tentative and, in some cases, premature.

The important question, however, is not whether collaboration is good for the charter school movement or good for districts. Instead, the question is whether these partnerships will benefit students by providing them with greater access to high-quality schools and an equitable allocation of resources.

Such promise is compelling enough to merit serious attention from funders, researchers, advocates, and policymakers. Collaboration is underway in enough places that we have the opportunity to find answers regarding the worst fears and greatest hopes. CRPE will continue to study the implementation and effectiveness of both portfolio districts and collaboration compact cities. We also will continue to support effective implementation by publishing reports and case studies, providing hands-on technical assistance, and supporting a fast-growing network of cities that have committed to a pioneering path.

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