

HERDING CATS: Managing Diverse Charter School Interests in Collaboration Efforts

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About This Report

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Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families. Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools. CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through philanthropy, federal grants, and contracts.

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Even with a district that was united, or had a mindset to work with charters as a group, I'm not sure that they would be able to work with the charter sector because they'd be working with different factions.

—A New York City charter leader

Introduction

Since the first charter school law was passed in 1991, the relationship between charter schools and districts has been rife with conflict. To no one's surprise, districts have fiercely resisted competition from public schools of choice, especially when that competition grows beyond just a small number of schools and poses a real threat to the district's financial stability. For their part, charter schools have fought just as fiercely against any attempt to impose on their autonomy.

But as the charter school movement has matured and expanded over time, a growing number of district and charter leaders have slowly and quietly been forging agreements to work together. In many cases, mayors, superintendents, civic leaders, and others reach out to charter leaders to work across traditional charter-district divides. Collaboration touches one or more of these common themes: shared resources, shared responsibility, shared effort to build trust and collegiality, and shared work to ensure equal access to high-quality schools for all students in the city.

Different partnerships emphasize:

Collaborating on instructional strategies. In Spring Branch, Texas, the district opened two local charter schools, YES Prep and KIPP, in existing district school buildings. The goal was for district schools to benefit from the charter schools' instructional and leadership training expertise while the charter schools gain access to district electives and afterschool programming.

Educating children whom district schools have struggled to reach. In Philadelphia, the school district worked with high-performing charter schools that agreed to run schools that the district had been unable to improve for decades. Charter schools got much-needed access to school facilities and agreed to take all students currently in the school and in the neighborhood.

Providing equitable funding and access to district services. In Denver, district officials shared buildings and funding with charter schools who were willing to start much-needed programs that could serve students with severe special needs.

Addressing citywide issues of equity and access. In several cities, including Washington, D.C., Denver, and New Orleans, shared enrollment systems, common school accountability standards, and even agreed-on procedures for student expulsion practices have become common.

Despite these important examples, collaboration in many cities is still seen as more informal than practical—a means to increased collegiality and shared best practices. But in cities where charter schools serve a significant share of the city's public school students—15 percent or more—the need for practical collaboration takes on a new urgency. School districts and charter schools in these “high-choice” cities cannot operate as if their actions do not affect each other's students and families. Partnerships of the kind listed above allow districts and charter schools to pool resources and share responsibility.

There are, however, “high-choice” cities where collaboration is more aspirational than real. In Detroit, where nearly half of the city's public schools operate as charter schools, parents struggle to navigate transportation, enrollment, and special education, and have difficulty finding quality options for their children. Schools fiercely compete to recruit students, yet school performance remains woefully low.¹ The system needs coordination, and charter schools are still not fully

1. See Michael DeArmond, Ashley Jochim, and Robin Lake, *Making School Choice Work* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2014).

engaged. Even in more stable Washington, D.C., where half of all students attend charter schools, a lack of coordination is still a barrier to parents' ability to choose, and to ensuring that all neighborhoods have strong schools.

School districts and charter schools have important reasons to partner. But many well-intentioned partnerships fall short of their full potential. Collaboration is messy, and for many districts and charter schools, a non-adversarial relationship is outside of their comfort zone. This paper focuses on the internal divisions within the charter community that make it difficult for charter schools to collaborate, and we present recommendations for both the charter community and districts about how to build collaboration despite variations and divisions within a charter sector. This is not to say that the district is free of its own inhibitions and internal divisions, but that is a subject for a different paper.

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Charter schools are not a monolithic bloc. They are a collection of fiercely independent organizations, each with its own unique motivations, interests, personalities, and concerns. This striking pluralism, if not recognized and skillfully maneuvered, can easily translate to infighting, tensions, and factions that can undermine innovative cross-sector efforts to increase outcomes and

equity. Districts, city officials, philanthropies, and others who hope to negotiate agreements or partnerships must navigate these interests skillfully if they hope to overcome past tensions in the interests of families and students.

We call for more sophisticated and customized collaboration strategies to create stronger, sustainable partnerships to accelerate student success in both charter and traditional district schools.

Our Research on District-Charter Collaboration

Over the last several years, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has been studying district-charter collaboration efforts across the country to learn about their promise and pitfalls. Our research focuses on the 23 cities that have signed *District-Charter Collaboration Compacts*, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. More information about the cities and their progress can be found [here](#). The formal Compact agreements outline the areas that both sectors agree to work on together over time. While some informal collaboration is happening in many localities, the Compacts represent the largest-scale formal collaborative effort to date. The conclusions in this paper are based on dozens of interviews and observations from four years of research on district-charter collaboration in these Compact cities.

Promising collaboration efforts have stalled out in many cities for many reasons, including lack of trust between district and charter leaders and staff, leadership turnover, and vague promises and implementation plans.

Our research to date has shown that promising collaboration efforts have stalled out in many cities for many reasons, including lack of trust between district and charter leaders and staff, leadership turnover, and vague promises and implementation plans.² In many cases of failed partnerships, however, schisms and tensions among charter schools played a role. In Minneapolis, the sheer number of charter schools as well as the number and types of entities that authorize them likely played a

role in the city's inability to maintain collaboration efforts after the Compact was signed. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, the city continues to work across sector lines, but the engagement by the district is limited to those charter schools it authorizes and does not include others in the city that are authorized by an Oklahoma university. In other cities outlined below, we have seen successful and lasting collaborations resulting from artful management of diverse charter interests.

2. Two years ago we reported that just a small number of Compact cities had made significant progress. A forthcoming analysis shows that collaboration projects have stalled or even regressed among about half of the Compact signatories.

This paper is the third in a series on topics in district-charter collaboration. The first explored the challenges of [leveraging co-location](#) of charter schools and district schools as a tool for school improvement. The second examined how some district superintendents looked beyond the usual candidate pool to [hire administrators](#) who had seen strong successes in the charter sector. Additionally, we recently released a brief on the [state role](#) in fostering collaboration.

In the following sections, we explain why charter schools are so diverse in their interests and the cost of failing to recognize the significant charter pluralism at play in most cities. We then call for more sophisticated coalition-building to support collaboration efforts in the future.

How Charter School Interests Vary: Sharers, Replicators, and More

Although charter schools are often talked about as a bloc, school-by-school variations are vast. A charter may operate as an independent or “stand-alone” school. Or, a charter school may be part of a network or charter management organization (CMO). Some charter schools target specific student populations; others operate much like a traditional district school, serving a surrounding neighborhood. Some charter schools are based on certain instructional models or hold particular philosophies when it comes to educating children.

This differentiation should be expected. And it is even encouraged in cities whose goal is to serve the diverse needs of children and provide parents with school choices. When districts decide to collaborate with the charter “sector”—say, by sharing services for special education—it will have

Any good negotiation has to start with understanding the other party’s perspective. But in the case of charter schools, there can be as many perspectives as there are schools.

to deal with a diverse set of partners, not a single bloc with well-defined common interests. The task can therefore be more complex than negotiating, for example, a transportation contract or even a collective bargaining agreement with teachers. Any good negotiation has to start with understanding the other party’s perspective. But in the case of charter schools, there can be as many perspectives as there are schools.

In general, our interviews and observations reveal that charter schools interested in collaboration fall on a continuum between two extremes that we call “Sharers” and “Replicators.”

Sharers are charter schools interested in collaborating mainly as a way to share lessons and instructional strategies from teacher to teacher and principal to principal. Sharers are typically stand-alone schools that don’t wish to grow or replicate beyond existing campuses but do want to see themselves as an asset to families and the overall system of public education. Although they value their independence, these schools have no desire to replace the district. Sharers are often led by lifelong educators who view their school as a laboratory that can inform all public schools. These leaders embrace the idea of sharing and learning alongside the district, often around common instructional aims such as tackling joint implementation of new science standards or joining teacher-led professional learning groups. Lacking scale to purchase some things on their own, they also are more willing to use district services to defray costs. Although they may have their own facility, for example, they may want to collaborate on transportation or food services, even if it means adjusting their schedules.

The leader of a typical Sharer, whom we interviewed in Boston, said her school’s mission is to pilot new ideas for how to best serve the vulnerable group of students who have dropped out of school or are at risk of doing so. The principal explained that the school does not want to grow its enrollment beyond what it can serve at its single campus: “We are not about real estate acquisition or lifting caps. We’re not sure our model is replicable. . . . We are about collaboration and dissemination to maximize impact.” The school broadens its impact beyond its own walls by working with three districts to help turn around schools, and with a religious school to develop the latter’s curricula and prepare for Common Core.

Sharers are typically stand-alone schools that don't wish to grow or replicate beyond existing campuses. Replicators are schools interested in reproducing high-performing charter schools as fast as possible to achieve maximum impact.

interested in collaborations mainly to gain access to buildings and funding. They are less interested in shared professional development or teacher recruitment, things they believe they can more easily do on their own.

If you're a Replicator, you made a decision that the purpose of charters is to replace a significant part of a district that can't provide a good education. If you're a single school, you more likely view charters as a laboratory from which innovation can be taken to make the district as a whole better. You know, you end up with fundamentally different visions of what the sector is about and how it relates to the district and what political stance you take as a result.

—An Observer in New York City

A typical Replicator, a CMO leader we interviewed in Boston, explained why his school is not involved in joint professional development or teacher-to-teacher work: “The pedagogical work is important, but it doesn't move the needle for kids because it is small scale. The partnerships are difficult to sustain. . . . We get direct benefit in terms of buildings, but most charters aren't getting a direct benefit from collaboration.” As with other Replicators, this leader approaches collaboration as a business deal that can make both parties better off. The partnership will last only as long as the mutual benefit continues: “In the scenario that charters advocate for growth and the district doesn't share that viewpoint, the district would not be a welcome partner.”

While Sharers might be most interested in sharing instructional improvement strategies and Replicators in sharing funding and facilities, both can contemplate a host of other ways to collaborate, depending on what tradeoffs make sense for them.

Replicators are schools interested in reproducing high-performing charter schools as fast as possible to achieve maximum impact. They have much less hope than Sharers that the district will improve with their help. Replicators typically operate multiple campuses and are organized as CMOs, providing many support functions that districts typically provide. They are confident in their instructional model and believe it has demonstrated strong academic performance. Since a Replicator's mission is to achieve impact through growth, Replicators are

Table 1 outlines the areas of collaboration that Sharers and Replicators are most and least likely to engage in with districts. While Sharers might be most interested in sharing instructional improvement strategies and Replicators in sharing funding and facilities, both can contemplate a host of other ways to collaborate, depending on what tradeoffs make sense for them. For example, Replicators may agree to cede some autonomy and align their enrollment process with the district's in exchange for resources that would help them expand. Sharers, for their part, might sign on to a common enrollment system mainly as a way to build better bonds and goodwill with district schools.

Table 1. Charter Schools’ Priorities for District Partnerships

	Sharers	Replicators
Most Likely to Consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development • Curriculum • Teacher-to-teacher engagement • Recruiting and talent pipelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding • District facilities (new locations for expansion)
May Consider/ Won’t Block	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligned or common enrollment • Common accountability • Special education • English language learners/low income • Funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligned or common enrollment • Common accountability • Special education • English language learners/low income • Recruiting and talent pipelines
Least Likely to Consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District facilities (new locations for expansion) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development • Curriculum • Teacher-to-teacher engagement

Other factors influence how willing charter schools are to make deals with districts. These include:

How much they value autonomy. Almost all collaboration requires charter schools—Sharers and Replicators alike—to give up at least some autonomy, something they value and see as central to their identity. But some schools value autonomy more than others. This can influence how receptive a school may be to district collaboration opportunities or to calls for charter schools to collectively address problems, such as those students and families face in accessing charter schools in a given city.

Whether they deal in transforming/turning around existing schools. Charter operators that turn around low-performing district schools are especially incentivized to collaborate: by agreeing to certain district rules they gain easy access to school facilities. The tradeoff is that they often continue to operate as a neighborhood school, rather than being able to draw children from throughout the city like other charter schools. Mastery Charter Schools in Philadelphia accepts all students from a neighborhood in exchange for control over the building and full instructional autonomy; such schools may be more willing to play by district enrollment and accountability rules.

Many other factors can shape the beliefs charter schools hold in regard to their charter peers, such as whether a school or charter network is “home-grown” or from out of state, whether a school employs a “no excuses” or “progressive” instructional strategy, or whether a school is well-funded by national foundations.

For example, leaders of stand-alone “Sharer” schools can resent the more politically connected school leaders (often from high-performing CMOs). Sharers often feel they have less leverage to make deals with the district and do not have an equal seat at the negotiating table. To address this, a group of stand-alone schools in New York City banded together to get the district’s central office to pay them more attention. Similarly, after several years of strongly preferential treatment for two large CMOs, Denver recognized the need to work with high-performing, but smaller, charter operators on facilities issues.

As to how willing school districts are to make deals with charter schools, factors like charter leader personalities and charter school capacity and quality (real or perceived) can play a role. What happens when some charter schools in the community are not seen as high quality or high capacity? In cities like Cleveland, Ohio, charter quality and internal management capacity varied widely and posed vexing questions for districts that wanted to collaborate: Should the district engage with low-capacity charter schools in the hopes that peer support would help build capacity? Or should

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collaboration be limited to those schools and organizations that already had the capacity to participate and contribute? In Cleveland, after some discussion, the district has opted to work on collaboration with all willing charter operators.

In any city, the charter community has a range of personalities that can make collaboration challenging. Charter leaders are often not joiners by nature, having deliberately chosen to buck the norm and operate schools outside existing district bureaucracies. Simply because of personality differences or grudges, some leaders fiercely resist any collaboration.

But successful collaborators work through such differences in pursuit of wins for students. In Cleveland, one of the charter schools the district wanted to collaborate with had come up with a way to deliver a high-quality education on a very low budget. The school leader made no secret of his reluctance to partner with the district, even though doing so could drive additional funding to his school through levy dollars. After initial struggles to engage the school leader, the district persisted and made clear why they wanted to collaborate. Slowly, the charter leader began coming to meetings, then began speaking up, and today is a valued and active member of a district-charter collaboration committee.

The Perils of Failing to Recognize and Adapt to Charter Pluralism

Functionally, coalitions and collaborations only stay together if they continue to serve the self-interests of the parties.

—A Boston charter leader

When districts don't recognize charter pluralism—in leaders' personalities, in school or network missions and governance, in where leaders fall on the Sharer-Replicator continuum—collaboration efforts can stall or fail to achieve tangible wins.

We observed that the 23 Compacts set lofty goals but many became inactive; some quickly and some over the course of a year or two. In these cities, interest waned and meetings became pro forma or didn't happen at all. Interest is hard to sustain when initiatives require substantial time from already overstretched school leaders and deliver little concrete benefit in return.

Our observations and interviews suggest that neither charter nor district participants fully understood what each side would need to make benefits tangible and to turn goals on paper into action. In the interest of achieving or maintaining consensus, Compact discussions led to abstract agreements in principle. These helped launch productive collaborative discussion in some cases. But in many cities, hammering out these broad agreements sucked up so much energy that individual charter schools and districts didn't seize opportunities for meaningful partnerships on critical issues.

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Districts that hope to create just such substantive collaborations with charter schools face an immediate challenge in especially pluralistic or factionalized charter communities. In these communities there is no “common point of departure” in negotiations with districts, as one local charter association leader told us. “People [in the local charter community] are all over the place in terms of what they agree would be a good idea to do or how to do it, or whether it’s worth doing at all.”

In cities like this, charter leaders have vastly different views about the purpose of charter schooling. This directly influences how they respond to efforts to mobilize as a community around pressing issues—issues that often impact districts, too, which in turn can color potential district-charter collaboration. In New York City, for example, Democracy Builders, a parent advocacy organization associated with Democracy Prep charter schools, has led a push for all the city’s charter schools to backfill, accepting new students to fill empty seats during the school year.³ But many other city charter schools oppose the move, saying backfilling would impede their effectiveness and infringe on their autonomy. This infighting came amid a bitter public feud between Mayor DiBlasio and Eva Moskowitz, the CEO of Success Academies, a powerful charter management organization in New York City; the mayor and Superintendent Carmen Fariña have pointed to questions of equity, including backfill, as reasons to limit charter school access to New York City’s public school buildings.⁴

Similarly, charter schools disagreed about whether new charter petitions in Nashville should be approved only in particular neighborhoods. Some understood the district’s preference to target students who needed a new option, while others tended to the often strongly held view that charter schools should be open enrollment, locating where they pleased. Ultimately the state passed a law that favored the latter opinion.

The charter sector’s diverse interests highlight how fragile even the most seemingly solid collaboration environments can be. Boston benefits from a small, generally highly aligned charter sector. But even there, legislative fights over raising the cap on the number of charter schools allowed to open have sparked tension within the charter community.

Although Mayor Marty Walsh has been a vocal supporter of both charter schools and collaboration, the city council voted to oppose a ballot measure to lift the charter cap. Replicators see clear advantages in a raised cap, since it allows them to expand. But independent operators with no expansion plan—Sharers—see a raised cap as a political liability, boosting the risk of backlash from interest groups and politicians opposed to charter growth. Sharers also worry that Replicators will jeopardize their positive relationships with the district by making legislative or other political deals that provoke district ire.

The Boston charter community works hard to maintain solidarity through a state alliance that promotes internal problem-solving to prevent friction. When some charter schools began to worry about other charter schools poaching their teachers, for example, the schools all agreed to notify the affected school if they interviewed one of their teachers. One observer noted, “The Boston charter sector is close-knit and unified. Anyone doing something as a stand-alone flyer is doing harm to the sector.”

3. Emma Brown, “[New York City charters leave thousands of seats unfilled despite exploding demand, study finds.](#)” *Washington Post*, April 10, 2015.

4. Ruth Ford, “[What’s Behind the Bill de Blasio-Eva Moskowitz Feud Over Charters.](#)” *CityLimits.org*, November 5, 2015.

An adversarial relationship with a local school district can cut both ways for a charter community. Some cities find that it helps heal internal divides and can actually unite the charter community as a common district enemy. Other cities find that it further fragments the community. In New York City, the charter community split in the face of a more hostile leadership from Chancellor Fariña and Mayor DeBlasio: some charter schools wanted to try to work with the new administration; others wanted to go to war.

More Targeted Collaboration Strategies Offer a Better Way Forward

Collaboration, compromise, and coalition-building in cities with significant percentages of students in charter schools are a necessity, not a nicety, for citywide systems of public schools to operate efficiently and effectively. Such collaboration can be win-win, with both parties accomplishing goals that neither could accomplish in isolation, whether those goals are around growth or broader impact

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through professional learning networks and supports. But if such efforts are to succeed over the long term, charter schools and their interests must be understood not as a uniform bloc, but as a loose and tentative coalition of fiercely autonomous and mission-driven organizations.

For these reasons, those who want to work in partnership with charter communities, whether mayors, district leaders, or charter association heads, need to adopt more sophisticated and targeted collaboration strategies.

WHAT CAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS DO?

Understand motivations before you act. Making broad decisions that could impact all charter schools but only consider the views of some—whether the loudest or most influential—will likely backfire in long run. Recognize the diversity in motivations, missions, governance, political risk, and personalities.

Understanding motivations can also help city leaders think about how best to maximize charter schools' impact in the city. Perhaps, given the right incentives, some stand-alone charter schools will expand to serve more students. Perhaps the school founder doesn't want to grow the school, but has developed or is willing to develop a leader who would launch another charter school in an area the district identifies as in need. High-quality Sharers might be incentivized to partner with or mentor lower-quality Sharers who are unwilling to accept district help.

Look for unifying citywide “bread and butter” issues such as funding or enrollment caps. Make sure common initiatives have strong buy-in; all parties need to see high value in and clear outcomes from them. As noted in Table 1, Sharer and Replicator interests align in areas such as funding and common enrollment. Chicago mapped a widely supported Compact that covered funding, accountability, and personalized learning practices. The city established student-based budgeting across district and charter schools that provides greater school-by-school funding equity and better ties spending decisions to the classroom—a move both the district and charter schools could support. The district also granted more facilities dollars to charter schools, cementing charter sector support. A cross-sector committee designed a common accountability tool to provide parents with apples-to-apples comparisons across district and charter schools. And two cohorts of district and charter school leaders are collaborating as they implement personalized learning models. Boston, in contrast, struggled to garner buy-in from most charter schools on an initiative targeting minority males; the initiative has since ended.

Create school or network collaborations when a citywide approach is not possible. Districts in cities like Boston, Chicago, Denver, and Central Falls, Rhode Island, that differentiated their collaboration efforts have seen success. This success stems at least in part from districts that understand the diversity of their charter sectors and then tailor their efforts to match those diverse interests.

Long after exhausting its 2011 Gates Foundation grant, the Central Falls school district continues to collaborate with a successful local charter network. This partnership has proven durable and successful because it is both flexible and customized to the needs of both partners. As the Blackstone Valley Prep (BVP) network grew, it needed a more sophisticated support system for its special education students. In an initial six-month pilot, the district offered BVP special education staff time and expertise at cost. As BVP teachers saw improvements and gained confidence, district staff began advising BVP leadership on special education improvements generally. Today, the two systems regularly collaborate on special education broadly, from managing records to crafting post-graduation student transition plans. The district has adopted BVP's math curriculum; the district and the charter network plan to work together on math instructional strategies. Not all the local charter schools need or want such a relationship with the district. But by both parties remaining nimble and responsive, successful collaboration resulted.

WHAT CAN CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERSHIP DO?

Create opt-in opportunities for highly contentious issues. Voluntary participation has proven a successful strategy in some cities when launching significant new initiatives that trigger widespread charter concern about loss of autonomy. Washington, D.C., leaders rolled out a citywide common enrollment system as a voluntary initiative to the charter community. Today, after some initial consternation, all but a handful of charter schools in D.C. now participate; the district schools joined soon after. Denver district leaders took the same approach with similar results.

In Philadelphia, the Compact governing council proposed a district-charter effort to address the dire shortage of strong school leaders. The response from the charter school community was mixed. Some leaders wanted to share what they had learned internally about how to vet, train, and support strong principals. Other charter schools had tailored their own leader pipelines and training programs to their instructional approach or mission. These schools did not have the time or inclination to participate; some may have been unwilling to share what they viewed as proprietary. Wisely, the program was devised as—and continues as—voluntary. To date, PhillyPLUS has placed more than 80 new school leaders in participating district, charter, and private schools across the city. In Hartford, Connecticut, the CMO Achievement First was tapped to help prepare promising candidates to fill principal positions in district schools. Although much of the rest of the Compact agreement has fallen by the wayside, the collaborative training program has been a celebrated success and continues to thrive, with the district now fully funding the work.

Cultivate effective leadership to build coalitions. Charter schools (like district schools) act in self-interest; this is neither surprising nor wrong. But the Compact cities we studied show that individual schools can and will unite to support a collective good. This happens when strong and savvy leadership helps schools overcome their entrenched fears and resistance and ensures a diversity of voices are heard.

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Cities that have overcome political divides to build successful coalitions have facilitators that helped all voices be heard in the Compact process. In Boston, an independent *chief collaboration officer* played the third-party facilitator role; in D.C., it was the deputy mayor; in Denver, a former deputy superintendent took on the task. Our [earlier report](#) on collaboration describes the importance of having a broker who holds the trust of both charter and district leaders.

Strong Compact governing councils ensure broad representation from both the charter community and other key leaders in contemplating collaboration that can impact a city’s entire system of schools. Effective Compact leadership and attention to governance in Boston has helped sustain momentum amid turnover in the mayor’s office and across key leaders in the district and charter sectors. Cleveland initially invested considerable time to carefully detail Compact governance; it describes how subcommittees are to be formed to tackle specific issues and requires every participating school to serve on at least one subcommittee. Such governance structures deliver on two fronts: they bring multiple voices to the table and ensure that more than just a few over-tapped leaders share the burden of the time and effort such collaboration initiatives demand.

Charter associations or support organizations can also play a key leadership role, freed from being attached to any one school or CMO. Reflecting on the Illinois Network of Charter Schools (INCS), one observer told us, “I’m not quite sure where the charter sector in Chicago would be in terms of collaboration without Andrew [Broy] or without INCS, because he spends the majority of his time bridging relationships between charters.” INCS was able to convince some reluctant charter schools to agree to stickier issues like accountability and weighted student funding which ultimately benefited students. Similarly, we heard that the California Charter Schools Association helped bring charter schools together to resolve common issues with the Los Angeles Unified School District. The New York City Charter School Center worked on state legislation and was able to recruit the support of charter schools that wouldn’t directly benefit from it.

Districts, too, need strong leadership for successful collaboration. A high-ranking official—ideally the superintendent or a cabinet member—must understand charter schools’ diverse interests. Leaders must not favor certain charter schools over others and must insist lower-level staff do the same. District leaders can help shield charter schools from internal or external skeptics. Charter authorizing staff are often the district officials most familiar with charter schools. But collaboration also requires the support of district principals or central office staff engaged in student support, like special education. Strong leadership can help break down departmental silos—silos that can hamper communication and collaboration. In Florida, the state education department seeded district-charter collaboration funding in Duval and Miami-Dade counties. But it has required a clear mandate from the local superintendents to actually get collaboration off the ground.

Inspiring the Next Stage of District-Charter Collaboration

After five years of research on Compact cities, we have seen that both districts and charter schools have much to gain from collaborating. But as this paper shows, effective long-term partnerships require more than simply getting sign-off from two “sectors.” Diverse charter politics, missions, and even personalities call for savvy coalition-building efforts and strong leadership. Creating a unified coalition of fiercely autonomous schools led by independent-minded individuals is difficult but definitely not impossible.

Treating the charter sector as a uniform bloc is a mistake. Collaboration strategies that assume monolithic motivations and needs are likely to fail. Moving forward requires more nuanced

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strategies tailored to the needs of the players on the ground. For that reason, collaboration agreements and approaches will necessarily vary from city to city, and in the future may or may not look like the formal Compacts that have come before. Clearly, developing an effective partnership is hard, time-consuming work. All parties must see clear benefits from collaboration for these partnerships to flourish over the long haul.

A new era of district-charter collaboration will require careful cultivation, patience, and fortitude. We hope districts and charter schools can avoid more missed opportunities to create a more effective and equitable education system that delivers tangible benefits to students.

About the Authors

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