

Partnership Schools:
New Governance Models for Creating
Quality School Options in Districts

Sean Gill and Christine Campbell

October 2017

Introduction

The Cramer Hill Elementary School in Camden, New Jersey, opened in a brand new facility this September for more than 700 students in Kindergarten through 8th grade. Students there benefit from more than just a new facility—they also benefit from the academic approach of Mastery Schools, one of the premier charter networks in the area. But Cramer Hill itself is not, legally speaking, a charter school. Instead, it is one of seven *renaissance schools*—neighborhood public schools that the Camden City School District runs in partnership with nonprofit organizations. In at least ten cities across the country, including Camden and Atlanta, schools operate under some sort of *partnership school* model: a “third way” governance strategy that breaks through district-charter divides that could help improve struggling schools or increase the number of quality school options in a neighborhood. Camden civic leader George E. Norcross III, chairman of the Board of Trustees at The Cooper Health System, explains:

“If we are serious about reforming education and improving the opportunities afforded to all students in our country, we have to be willing to look beyond our entrenched positions to find compromise and 21st century solutions. Put simply, we have to be open to finding newer and better ways of educating our children—for their sake and the sake of our future.”¹

Like charter schools, partnership schools enjoy more freedom of action than a traditional district-run school. Autonomy and flexibility can lead to higher-quality learning opportunities or more diversity in school missions and instructional models than currently exists in cities.² Yet, partnership schools are legally distinct from charter schools, which are authorized under a specific process outlined by a state’s charter school law, while partnership schools may be permitted under a separate state law. In some cases the legal framework for these schools often rests upon districts’ inherent powers to purchase services through contracts.³ In other cases they operate under specific state laws for partnership schools that allow the district to establish more local context than they could as a charter school authorizer.⁴ Most partnership schools are operated by a local charter network, or incubated alongside charter schools but rather than seeking authorization, they enter into contracts with districts and become special district schools.

CRPE has studied the dual concepts of school autonomy and district-charter collaboration for many years.⁵ Partnership schools might be thought of as the next stage in district-charter collaboration or a key component in implementing a [portfolio management strategy](#). As relatively new entities, the theory of change is largely untested and student outcomes not yet studied but the approach is promising.⁶ This brief aims to offer a lay of the land on partnership schools and outline questions that policymakers and researchers should consider as more of these partnerships grow. Leaders contemplating school improvement strategies in their communities may find that partnership schools can help deliver on the promise of public education for students and their families in ways that neither district or charter schools could do on their own.

Why Are Districts and Charters Taking the Partnership Route?

A key hope for communities embarking on partnership schools is that they will offer high-quality schools but in a less contentious way than with charter schools. One reason for this is that they are developed and operated in closer coordination with districts and look and feel more like neighborhood schools, though some charter leaders warn that the schools will still be viewed by opponents as charter schools. Families can opt in or out of partnership schools, though neighborhood children are given preference or guaranteed admission. Students remain as “district” students for the purposes of state financing and accountability, an especially important issue for districts worried about [enrollment decline](#). At the same time, communities hope to offer enough incentives to attract innovative and high-performing groups to run the campuses. The arrangements often start with a designated facility in mind—no small thing in most cities where real estate is a barrier to opening charter schools. More district services may be offered, such as transportation or food service, reducing some of the organization’s costs. Many other areas where the operator and district may coordinate, from data systems to school hours, can be negotiated to be responsive to specific district or operator preferences, which is generally less possible under a charter school framework.

Where Do Partnership Schools Operate and Who Operates Them?



Cities across the country are establishing partnership schools, tapping into a mix of national and local organizations; some also operate charter schools and some have been established specifically to operate partnership schools. Aside from Camden, some of the new notable examples include:

- **Atlanta, Georgia:** [Purpose Built Schools](#) and [Kindezi Schools](#), both high-performing and locally sought-after charter school networks, are building a K-12 feeder pattern of traditional public schools within Atlanta Public Schools, but with the flexibility and full autonomy of a charter school.
- **Indianapolis, Indiana:** Indianapolis Public School leaders advocated for passage of the state’s 2014 “[Innovation Network Schools](#)” law in partnership with the mayor’s office (the city’s largest charter authorizer), allowing school districts to convert, open new, or restart existing schools into new, autonomous schools with their own 501(c)(3) boards. There are 16 Innovation schools in 2017, many are incubated and supported by a local education nonprofit, [The Mind Trust](#).
- **Tulsa, Oklahoma:** [Greenwood Leadership Academy](#) opened in fall 2017 and is operated by a local community group, [Met Cares Foundation](#). The school operates under state legislation passed in 2015.⁷ Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) also pursues performance contracts with school leadership teams. Tulsa operates other partnership models where TPS employees provide the primary instruction and partner organizations provide key wraparound services.

Additional examples are listed in Appendix A. As shown here, some partnership schools are made possible by state law, while others exist solely based on local initiative. Our assumption is that most districts would not need explicit permission from states, via law or some state waiver from law, to contract for school instruction. However, having a separate legal framework may provide an additional level of legal certainty or political cover.⁸ According to Brandon Brown, senior vice president of Education Innovation at The Mind Trust in Indianapolis, “It seemed essential to pass the law in Indiana to set the framework up for maximum success.” It could also help clarify the legal status of employees or provide them with access to certain state-provided benefits, such as pensions or healthcare.

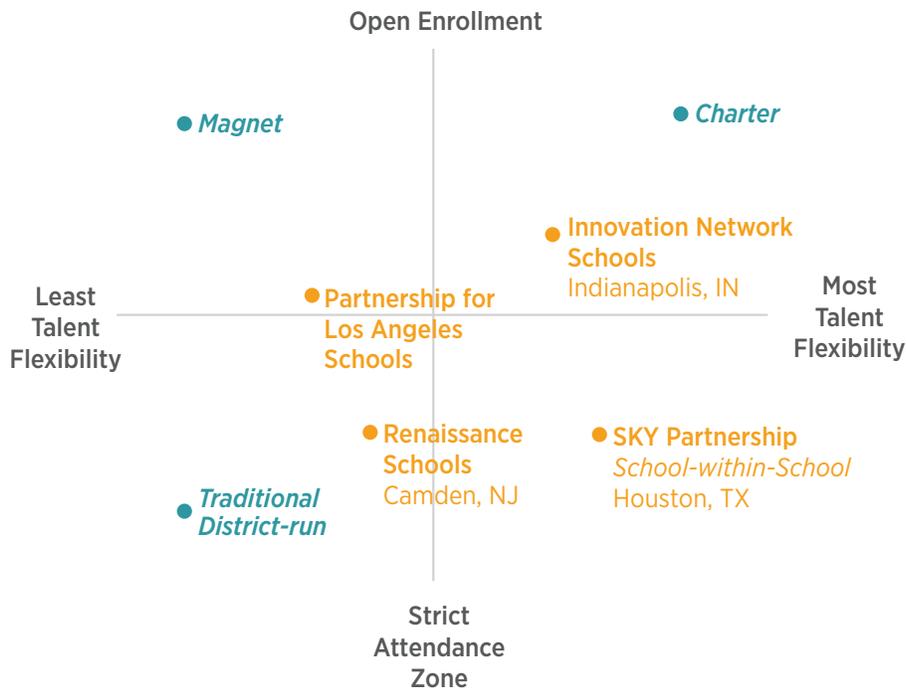
Partnering with Purpose in Atlanta

Thomasville Heights Elementary in south Atlanta looked and felt a little different when students began the school year in 2016. Located across the street from public housing, it serves many of the students who live there and had struggled with low performance for years. To break the cycle, Atlanta Public Schools (APS) took a bold step to partner with Purpose Built Schools, which operates the highly regarded Drew Charter School in east Atlanta. The contract between the district and the school provides roughly the same funding as other APS schools. With additional fundraising by Purpose Built, Thomasville Heights now offers an impressive array of programs aimed at jump-starting student success. Students can attend new programs like arts, robotics, tutoring, and after-school activities. Families can access school-based community support services, therapists, and a legal clinic to help with housing concerns. In the coming years, Atlanta plans additional partnerships to provide students and families with improved neighborhood schools and wrap-around services. For example, KIPP Metro Atlanta is preparing to take on Woodson Park Academy in northwest Atlanta in 2019 as part of a significant community development plan that could bring in \$100 million. Atlanta Superintendent Meria Carstarphen reasons, “KIPP is going to help raise money we could never raise on our own. We don’t have that kind of juice in Atlanta, mostly because of the cheating scandal.”⁹

How Do Partnership Schools Compare to Other Governance Models?

Broadly speaking, partnership schools have less flexibility than charter schools, but more autonomy than a typical district-run school.¹⁰ Figure 1 contrasts two key dimensions of flexibility: the ability to hire or replace teachers and the ability to recruit students from a wide geography. Hiring teachers covered by collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) could reduce opposition to new school governance models, but teacher talent policies can be constrained by state laws or by CBAs that generally lead to uniformity. Charter schools tend to have the most flexibility over both of those dimensions while district-run traditional schools tend to have the least flexibility. Magnet schools, which are district-run, typically are not tied to attendance zones but have the same teacher talent policies as other district schools (and are usually covered by the same collective bargaining unit). Various partnership models can score high in one dimension while being low in the other: Renaissance Schools in Camden have more talent flexibility than traditional district schools, but still mostly serve students in a set neighborhood, while Innovation Network schools in Indianapolis have some talent and enrollment flexibility.

FIGURE 1. Dimensions of Flexibility: Partnerships Offer More Talent Flexibility and A Range of Enrollment Flexibilities



Of course, there are many other attributes, policies, services, and other areas of autonomy that go into running a school. When partnership schools are created, the contractual agreement typically defines these autonomies, but gives more leeway to both the district and the partnership school than a charter agreement would: for example, more flexibility around enrollment. For instance, the school may be permitted to have a selective admissions policy, such as targeting “at-risk” youth or serving gifted students. If permitted by law, would the school want to be a distinct legal entity or remain a unit within the school district? Table 1 lists key attributes that districts and partnership school operators should consider, to the extent possible, as they define the partnership. Attributes highlighted in green are those that partnership schools always or almost always exhibit. We have also tried to show where the typical district, charter, and hypothetical partnership school might fall on these criteria, with the caveat that these are broad generalizations.

TABLE 1. Partnership Schools Can Differ From Both Typical District Schools and Charter Schools

	Attribute	Typical District School	Typical Charter School	Partnership Schools
Talent	Teachers are district employees	●	○	◐
	Principals/school leaders are district employees	●	○	◐
	School leader can be fired or hired by district	●	○	○
	School evaluated using performance contract	○	●	●
	School leader has full hiring and firing authority	○	●	◐
	Teachers are members of district-wide collective bargaining unit	●	○	◐
Location & Enrollment	District directly determines where school should be located	●	○	●
	Facility included as part of agreement	N/A	○	●
	Students in Neighborhood Attendance Zone automatically enrolled	●	○	◐
	Students in Neighborhood Attendance Zone given preference	●	○	◐
	School can enroll students living outside district (no district approval needed for inter-district transfer)	○	●	◐
	School can utilize selective admissions criteria (tests, auditions, recommendations)	◐	○	◐
Services	District office provides food service	●	○	●
	District office provides transportation	●	○	●
	District office provides curriculum and instructional leadership	●	○	○
Finance, Administration, and Oversight	School is incorporated as a separate legal and fiscal entity	○	●	◐
	District collects money from the state for enrolled students and determines level of funding available to school (directly or indirectly through position allocation)	●	◐	●
	Local tax revenues, including facilities financing, available to support school	●	◐	●
	District has final say on whether school should open or close	●	◐	●
	Number of schools set by district	●	○	●
<p>Key: ● = Always or Usually True ◐ = Varies ○ = Not Usually or Never True</p> <p>Attributes highlighted in green are those that partnership schools always or almost always exhibit.</p>				

Having conversations about coordination before a school is created distinguishes partnership schools from many district-charter collaboration efforts, which typically assume a charter has already been granted and is in operation. In the latter, leaders meet to discuss how they might combine efforts or purchase services together. With partnership schools, these relationships are established from the outset. For example, according to Joe Ferguson, chief operating officer of Mastery’s Renaissance Schools, in the early stages of talks in Philadelphia and Camden, there were many conversations and negotiations about operational activities, but “there was never a conversation dictating academics: both districts wanted to see big changes on academics and let Mastery do its work.” Over time, changes were made to the services Mastery would purchase from the districts, but some were obvious. On transportation, Ferguson says, “We would prefer not to ever run a bus company.”

District Motivations and Challenges

In conversations with CRPE, district leaders who have adopted a partnership schools model or are contemplating these relationships revealed a number of motivations. Chief among them, the potential for “disruptive” change and the ability to turn around campuses faster than the current internal district capacity would allow. Some charter networks have powerful and positive reputations among families. They are also known for strong instructional practices, something some districts see as a potential resource to be shared with other district schools. At the same time, districts could offer more informal feedback as the agreement is developed and help steer operators to serve unaddressed student needs. District leadership also recognize that charter networks may bring philanthropic support that is untapped by or unavailable to districts. Families like to have a menu of options, district leaders noted, and partnering and creating new options helps position the district as a vibrant and innovative place to educate children.

District leaders also cite the downsides and the risks of such an arrangement, including a perceived increase of legal, financial, and academic risks. Partnership agreements may require considerable time and effort to negotiate and finalize before being signed. The quality of charter schools varies and turnaround efforts are difficult—especially for charter operators accustomed to opening new schools from scratch. Turnaround efforts are notoriously difficult to sustain and in this arrangement, if the charter operator loses steam, the district is ultimately responsible. Some district leaders shared a concern that the district mandate to ensure quality education across a city is not shared or well-understood by the typical charter operators who focus on a much smaller set of schools. This misalignment can generate distrust and complicate the relationship that these partnerships demand. Districts may remain subject to legal liabilities for students that end up limiting the partnership school’s flexibility. For example, Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) requires its partnership schools to implement its school behavior response plan. “It was tricky to balance the autonomy that Met Cares [the operator] desired with the legalities of the school serving TPS students,” said Mark Modrcin, director of Charter and Partnership Schools. Lastly, some district leaders simply questioned the idea behind the model, wondering why they need outsiders in the first place. “We’re not waiting for Superman,” one leader said. Still others wondered why successful charter operators would need or want to form these partnerships with districts.

Charter Operator Motivations and Challenges

In a related conversation with leaders in the charter school movement who had embarked on a partnership model or were considering it, they revealed their own motivations for this new model. They see partnership schools as compatible with charter missions to be change agents for communities, particularly the neighborhoods most lacking in quality options. Partnership school arrangements can show that charter schools can adapt and take on the most challenging students, countering powerful anti-charter sentiment. Direct facility and financial support can make operating the school much more sustainable than under a charter model—even if they have the power of a large charter management organization behind them. Maintaining a relationship with districts could be seen as cumbersome, but for at least Mastery Schools, no different than their experience as a charter authorized by a district. And in cities where there is resistance to opening more charter schools, partnerships offer a third way: retaining much of the autonomy and culture of high-performing models in a more collaborative arrangement with the district and neighborhood communities.

But charter leaders acknowledged the arrangement presents risks. Partnership schools involve some constraints on their mission and their ability to operate flexibly; these are important challenges to consider. Inheriting an existing school, with all grades and pre-established culture, is much different than starting a school from scratch and requires a different skillset which many charter networks have not honed. Charter leaders must also be concerned about previous school assignment practices. For instance, English language learners or students receiving special education might be concentrated at these campuses compared to surrounding district schools or other charters. Uncertainties about the governance model could scare off philanthropic support, especially in the incubation stage.

There's no grace period to get it right: anti-charter or anti-reform voices will “gloat if it's not a roaring success,” said one leader. The work “could ruin our brand,” said another. They wonder if partnership schools must always be about turning around the most difficult schools rather than adding new and interesting schools into the portfolio. They also wonder whether taking on neighborhood attendance zones would perpetuate segregation or lead them to turn away students who want to access them (especially since some charter operators have long waitlists at schools in other parts of the city), or seek to create socioeconomically integrated schools. They worry about the loss of autonomy and whether they would be pressured to unionize. They wonder how they would recruit school leaders and who would actually be that person's boss. These charter leaders noted that partnership schools could turn out to be just as politically fraught as charter schools. They also said that charters that have partnership schools carry a heavy administrative burden, from getting two student data systems to “talk,” to the legal and communication demands of this new structure.

Future Questions

For both district and charter leaders in numerous cities, the motivations and perceived benefits have proven to outweigh the perceived risks, but show the many considerations leaders must work through as they contemplate partnership schools. More importantly, they must tend to these concerns as the partnerships continue. Policymakers, researchers, and the public alike must also work to resolve these questions:

- Is this just chartering by another name, or are there real differences in benefits for both the district and the school that make this a better governing model?
- Can large charter networks live with the difference in school status and freedoms—particularly around how and which students enroll—as districts push them to be more district-like?

- Can charter networks inoculate themselves from regulatory scope creep: the slow erosion of school autonomy?
- Will future school boards observe the agreements made earlier? Will contracts be renewed?
- Will the freedoms promised to partnership schools be delivered? Will they erode?
- Do partnership schools operate better under districts' inherent contracting powers or through governance models established in state law?
- Do new school providers emerge that didn't emerge under charter school laws? Will we see opportunities for innovation in new instructional models?
- Is this a better way to turn around challenging campuses? Will this encourage operators to take on the challenge of an entire campus rather than opening new campuses that grow one grade a year?
- Do partnership models help push districts to provide more autonomy to all campuses?
- Do the models provide stability in staffing and leadership? What about retirement benefits?
- Why would teachers and school leaders be attracted or disinterested?
- Most importantly, do partnership schools deliver better educational outcomes for students and families than current district and charter offerings?

Conclusion

Cities are exploring “third way” options in hopes of improving education without creating the fears, politics, and charged discussions that can accompany new charter schools. Partnership school arrangements appear to be on the rise and have a supportive constituency, but precise data to support this is hard to come by and a range of governance models might fit our definition.

These arrangements require a lot of work, which could be more than all the involved parties are able to commit to: Can partnership schools keep enough autonomy to maintain a distinctive approach to instruction, or will their freedoms be gradually eroded by district policy? And can districts apply the right incentives and “teeth” to make sure that the operators who seek partnerships are “committed to the community,” as one charter leader involved in a partnership school said, “and not just to the perks of enrollment zones?”

On the plus side, partnership schools can help solve charters' growing need for school facilities and provide a firm answer to the charge that some students will be left behind. They can provide districts with new options for families that need them while empowering principals, teachers, and families in ways that the traditional district structure cannot. And partnership schools may provide a financial benefit to districts worried about enrollment loss as students remain enrolled in the district.

Partnership schools offer a new educational arrangement that could provide students, families, and neighborhoods meaningful and long-lasting benefits.

Appendix A. Partnership School Examples

- Atlanta, Georgia: [Purpose Built Schools](#) and [Kindezi Schools](#), both high-performing and locally sought-after charter school networks, are building a K-12 feeder pattern of traditional public schools within Atlanta Public Schools, but with the flexibility and full autonomy of a charter school.
- Camden, New Jersey: [KIPP](#), [Mastery Charter Schools](#) and [Uncommon Schools](#) operate [Renaissance Schools](#), neighborhood schools housed in brand-new, or significantly reconstructed, buildings.
- Denver, Colorado: [Innovation Schools](#) were established in 2008 by state law, granting waivers from certain state and district rules to give them more sovereignty than traditional district schools but not as much as charter schools. Since then, Denver Public Schools has pushed to decentralize and increase autonomies. In 2016, they granted increased autonomies to four schools in the Innovation Zone. These schools were given flexibilities similar to charters without having to separate from the district. They were overseen by a nonprofit, were exempted from district meetings and initiatives, and allowed to “opt out of centralized district services.” Find a good description of the new autonomies [here](#).
- Grand Prairie, Texas: [Uplift Education](#), a Dallas-based charter network, runs a program at one elementary school as a “school-within-a-school.” Students can matriculate to Uplift’s middle and high school campuses.
- Indianapolis, Indiana: Indianapolis Public School leaders advocated for passage of the state’s 2014 “[Innovation Network Schools](#)” law in partnership with the mayor’s office (the city’s largest charter authorizer), allowing school districts to convert, open new, or restart existing schools into new, autonomous schools with their own 501(c)(3) boards. There are 16 Innovation schools in 2017, many are incubated and supported by a local education nonprofit, [The Mind Trust](#).
- Lawrence, Massachusetts: [Up Education Network](#) and other local organizations run “restart” or turnaround campuses in tandem with the state receivership of the district.
- Los Angeles, California: [Partnership for Los Angeles Schools](#) and [LA Promise Fund](#) are two locally founded school management organizations that operate schools under the Los Angeles Unified School District school choice and school autonomy initiatives.
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The School Reform Commission has turned over campuses as Renaissance Schools to foundations and charter organizations such as [Mastery Charter Schools](#) and [Global Leadership Academy](#), a local charter school.
- Spring Branch Independent School District, Houston, Texas: [Yes Prep](#) and [KIPP](#) operate programs serving classrooms and grades at existing district campuses through a “school-within-a-school” model. These programs share electives and school facilities and staff collaborate and coordinate some academic work.
- Tulsa, Oklahoma: [Greenwood Leadership Academy](#) opened in fall 2017 and is operated by a local community group, [Met Cares Foundation](#). The school operates under state legislation passed in 2015.⁸ Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) also pursues performance contracts with school leadership teams. Tulsa operates other partnership models where TPS employees provide the primary instruction and partner organizations provide key wraparound services.

Endnotes

1. George E. Norcross III, "[Working together has saved Camden's schools](#)," *New Jersey Star-Ledger*, April 13, 2017.
2. Meredith I. Honig and Lydia R. Rainey, "Autonomy and School Improvement: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go From Here?" *Educational Policy* 26, no. 3 (2012), 465-495.

Betheny Gross, et al, *Are City Schools Becoming Monolithic? Analyzing the Diversity of Options in Denver, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).
3. The legal powers of school districts are described in Richard Briffault, "The Local School District in American Law," in *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics*, ed. William G. Howell (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 25. See also Paul Hill, et al., *Reinventing Public Education: How Contracting Can Transform America's Schools* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 51-52.
4. Such as the *Urban Hope Act* (New Jersey Statutes Amended 18A:36C) adopted in New Jersey in 2012: "[Renaissance Schools](#)," New Jersey Department of Education, accessed September 21, 2017.
5. Robin Lake, et al., *Bridging the District-Charter Divide to Help More Students Succeed* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017); Paul Hill, *Defining and Organizing for School Autonomy* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2013).
6. For example, early signs in Indianapolis point to strong gains in passing scores among Innovation Network Schools; five of them ranked in the top ten schools saw the biggest gains in September 2017: Dylan Peers McCoy, "[Innovation schools saw some of the largest gains on ISTEP in Indianapolis Public Schools. Here are the schools that had big changes](#)," *Chalkbeat Indiana*, September 7, 2017.
7. [Oklahoma House Bill 1691](#) (2015); "[Partnership Schools](#)," Tulsa Public Schools, accessed September 21, 2017.
8. Hill, et al., *Reinventing Public Education*, 186.
9. Molly Bloom, "[Atlanta school plan could transform city — or leave families stranded](#)," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 26, 2017.
10. There are caveats to this trend. For example, in Indianapolis most Innovation Network schools are also charter schools. And Innovation Network schools that aren't charter schools still have the same autonomy as charters.

Acknowledgments

We thank the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for their support of this work. We are also grateful to the district, charter, and community leaders that have embarked on partnership schools together who shared their motivations, experiences, and insights. In particular, we thank Joe Ferguson, COO of Mastery Schools, Mark Modrcin, director of Charter and Partnership Schools, Tulsa Public Schools, and Brandon Brown, senior vice president of Education Innovation at The Mind Trust in Indianapolis for their time and suggestions. The framing and conclusions drawn in this report are solely the responsibility of the authors.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

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.