

## Expanding Opportunities for All Students Through District-Charter Collaboration

### PARKER:

Hi, everybody. My name is Parker Baxter, and I'm executive director of the Office of Parental Options in the Louisiana Department of Education. I'm also an affiliated [audio skip] scholar at the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington. This breakout session is on expanding opportunities for all students through district-charter collaboration.

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Odyssey Charter School, John Pardo | The Denver Post

### Slide 1

I want to start—this student here on the first slide is a student with cerebral palsy at a charter school in Denver. The reason why I want to start with this student is because he really, I think, is indicative of why I care about this issue and how I came to get involved in district-charter collaboration, specifically around students with special needs. When I first started as director of charter schools in Denver Public Schools several years ago, I first noticed that while the charter schools in the city—we had about 20 at that time, Denver now has about 35—at the time, charter schools were serving a percentage of special education students that was about the same as the district average, about 10 percent compared to the district average of about 12 percent. Once we looked further, we actually saw that the percentage of special education students was the same overall. The incidence of disabilities was absolutely skewed, and this student here was one of only two students in charter schools that had anything more than a mild moderate identification.

What we really came up with was that this was not an acceptable situation for a district that was openly and actively seeking to create new high-quality charter schools. It wasn't a tenable situation that those charter schools wouldn't be serving the city's most severely challenged students. So, we embarked on a year-long process whereby we worked with the charter schools in the city to encourage them to find ways to serve these students, and that's really how I got into this work. I then went to the Center on Reinventing Public Education where I was manager of the District-Charter Collaboration Compact, and this issue, again, is something that comes up all over the country with charter schools. I want to talk today about how districts and charters are collaborating, what those opportunities are, what the challenges are, and, hopefully, we can dive into those issues.

I just want to kind of start at this idea that really I come at this from the idea that all students should be served by all public schools, and that there shouldn't be some schools that don't serve some students. I think that's not the case now, both with charter schools and district schools. So, this is really about expanding access for all kids, and it also is grounded in the idea that school autonomy and student choice are not incompatible with this kind of equity of access or quality services for all. I think sometimes some folks believe that choice and school autonomy are really exceptions to the larger traditional system. Rather, I see it more as an opportunity to re-create the existing system. If we're going to do that, I firmly believe that collaboration is absolutely essential because in a world where we have autonomous schools of choice, that kind of collaboration and networking is essential to ensure that all kids get served equitably and well.

## Collaborating to Serve the Full Continuum

- ❖ All families should be able to choose the school that best meets their child's needs.
- ❖ All public schools—all district schools and all charter schools—should be open to all kids and well-equipped to serve students across the full continuum of needs.
- ❖ School autonomy and student choice are not incompatible with equity of access and excellence for all.
- ❖ Collaboration allows all schools—irrespective of type—to share resources, learn together, and create new economies of scale.

## Slide 2

The issue I want to make sure I touch on that comes up often in this conversation is the issue of LEA [local education agency] status. I can't emphasize enough how important this is in this conversation because collaboration often depends in a particular environment on the relationship among the schools. For example, in my previous experience in Denver, all the charter schools in this city were part of the district's LEA. So, the district maintained the responsibility for FAPE [Free Appropriate Public Education] and ensuring access for all kids and services to all kids, and the charter schools were within that. That allowed for a certain kind of collaboration and sharing that is not possible in other environments, say, for example, in Louisiana where charter schools are all each their own LEAs, and this creates a much different environment for collaboration. So, it's critical for both schools and districts to think about how the structure, the legal structure, of their relationship can influence or hinder or enable their collaboration.

Next I want to talk about what I consider the three equities that drive this kind of collaboration. This really comes from my experience in Denver where we were really trying to encourage the charter schools in our portfolio of schools to collaborate with us on this issue, and, invariably, these three issues came up. Equity of resources, and what I mean by that is equity of the resources available to serve students, so how is the district or the state sharing or distributing the public resources that are available from the federal government or the state government to serve these students? Equity of that distribution is essential to strong collaboration.

## Status Matters

- Charter Schools that are Part of LEAs
  - How can district policies and practices encourage and enable charter schools in serving students with special needs?
  - What can charter schools within a district-LEA do to ensure equitable access and quality services for their students?
- Charter Schools that are LEAs
  - What issues arise when charter-LEAs collaborate with district-LEAs?
  - How can charter school-LEAs and district-LEAs confront *The Paradox of Overlapping LEAs*.

## Slide 3

## Three Equities that Drive Collaboration

- Equity of Resources
- Equity of Access and Responsibility
- Equity of Accountability

## Slide 4

Then, secondly, equity of access and responsibility. So, here it goes to this idea again that there are not some schools in the system that are exceptions to the larger system, but that all schools in the system need to have equity of access and share in the responsibility of serving students, all students, including the most severely challenged students.

Next is equity of accountability, and, again, this is critical, that we apply the same expectations and requirements to all schools so that all schools are under the same responsibility to serve students and are accountable for doing so well and in compliance with the law.

Once you get those three equities sort of as the baseline, I want to talk about how collaboration can really enable schools to create new economies of scale by:

- Sharing costs that otherwise they would not be able to bear on their own
- Coordinating independent service providers such as psychologists, nurses, speech therapists, et cetera
- Sharing professional development opportunities around best practices and things like response to intervention or early identification, et cetera

I also want to talk about how the autonomy and the choice that charter schools enjoy often enables them to deliver services in ways that the traditional system is not set up to do. I think, often, what I've found is that charter schools can present to the district new ways of providing services that they may not have previously considered.

### Collaborate to Innovate

- ✦ Collaboration can enable schools to create new economies of scale through cost-sharing arrangements, coordination of independent related-service providers, and shared professional development opportunities.
- ✦ Autonomy and choice allows schools to implement delivery models not available through centralized district model
- ✦ Examples of sharing resources
- ✦ Examples of sharing responsibilities
- ✦ Examples of sharing services
- ✦ Examples of sharing information

### Slide 5

Now I want to talk a little bit about some examples of the kind of collaboration that I've seen elsewhere. I'll just start first by giving an example of sharing resources. This is an important one and, again, depends on the structure of the legal relationship. So, I'll use an example from Denver where we were sharing resources, but it's much different in another environment where it would be sharing resources among LEAs. But in Denver, the district, because it was the LEA, actually charged all the charter schools in the city a fee for special education services at the central level. What that meant was that each charter school paid approximately \$550 for each student in their school, not just the special education students in their school, but each student in the school. The rationale for this was that that was really the cost to the district for serving every special education student in the city that all students in the city, including students that do not have exceptionalities, needed to bear that cost. So, again, with this idea that you have equity of responsibility and shared resources, it was essential that the district received funds from charter schools that it itself was using in district schools to support special needs services. There are lots of issues with that. I think it worked well in some cases. It didn't work well in other cases, but it is the kind of resource sharing that I do think is essential for, especially in an environment where the LEA is responsible for certain services that unless the charter schools participate in, they really are getting a free ride.

I want to also talk about examples of sharing responsibilities. In this situation, I'll use the example of the SELPAs [Special Education Local Plan Areas] in California. In Los Angeles in particular, charter schools have been allowed to create their own administrative units among themselves and not so much with the district. They did it in collaboration with the district, but the actual SELPA is a collaboration among charter schools that they themselves agree to share responsibilities as an administrative unit and work together to ensure collaboration within that network. I think they've found that that's—some may argue that was a break off from the district, but I think in that environment, they found that was the best way for those schools to collaborate within the larger system.

Examples of sharing services. In this situation, I'll go back to Denver and talk about how charter schools in Denver are sharing buildings with district schools. That often creates new opportunities for sharing services. For example, if a small charter school is just starting up and is not able to afford, for example, a nurse, except beyond the absolute requirement to meet IDEA, they can share with the district school in the same building and partner to have a nurse on site five days a week, even though each of the schools by themselves might not have been able to afford that service.

Lastly, I'll talk about sharing information, and this is absolutely critical. If you're going to create one seamless system of service, and I think this is a particular challenge for environments where charter schools are their own LEAs. But I do think it's something that absolutely needs to happen in order to make sure that kids don't fall through the cracks and that we're basing decisions using data. The example here I'll use is in New Orleans where we're just beginning to create a centralized data system for all of the charter schools and the remaining recovery school district direct run schools and hopefully eventually as well Orleans Parish to create one seamless common data system so that whenever a student leaves a school, all schools in the system would be aware of that and would be able to coordinate and collaborate to make sure that student, if they need special services, they receive those services and are immediately reenrolled in a new school if that's what needs to happen. That kind of collaboration, I can't emphasize enough, is essential to making sure that kids don't fall through the cracks.

With that, I'm at the end of my presentation and thank you very much.