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Charter School Special Education Cooperatives

A MODEL FOR SUPPORTING THE DELIVERY OF SERVICES TO
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN CHARTER SCHOOLS

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Introduction

Charter schools have been one of the more visible recent components of the school reform movement. The excitement around this school model is predicated on the fact that these schools enjoy increased autonomy in making personnel, instructional, and other decisions while being held to the same accountability standards as other schools for meeting the needs of their student populations (Center for Education Reform, 2009). This accountability includes complying with the regulations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which clearly state that “children with disabilities who attend public charter schools and their parents retain all rights under this part” [CFR 34 Sec. 300.209]. However, evidence indicates that many charter schools are struggling to meet the needs of their special education student populations (Ahearn, 2001; Giovannetti, Ahearn, & Lange, 2001; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2000). Challenges related to limited resources and expertise prevent many charter schools from being able to serve students with disabilities effectively.

The purpose of this report is to describe one model for supporting charter schools in their efforts to serve students with disabilities—the special education services cooperative. These cooperatives enable charter schools to share the resource, personnel, and policy responsibilities associated with IDEA compliance. The authors of this report conducted a study of nine existing and discontinued cooperatives in an effort to identify the factors that facilitate, as well as the challenges associated with, the establishment and operation of such cooperatives. Following this introduction, we provide background information on the challenges for charter schools in serving students with disabilities and the potential that cooperatives have to help charter schools overcome those challenges. Next, we describe the methodology used to conduct the current investigation. We then summarize the study findings and conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for assisting charter schools that are interested in establishing special education cooperatives to meet the needs of their students with disabilities.

Background

While many charter schools have shown tremendous success in student achievement, charters have reported struggling to provide appropriate services so that students with disabilities also experience such success (Ahearn, 2001; Drame, 2010; Hehir, 2010). Research has often

indicated that enrollment of students with disabilities in charter schools lags behind that in traditional public schools (HR 4330: the All Students Achieving Through Reform Act of 2009-2010). These lower enrollments may be due to parents neglecting to inform a charter school about their child's existing special needs or IEP (Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007) or the charter school "counseling out" these students by advising parents that the school does not have the resources to serve them (Ahearn, 2001; Arcia, 2006; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007).

Charter schools that enroll students with disabilities face a further range of challenges. Navigating complex and hard-to-understand provisions of IDEA, such as the requirements for free, appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environment (LRE), are often challenging for those without significant policy expertise (Mead, 2008). Other challenges reported with meeting students' special education needs in charter schools include—

- finding and retaining qualified staff,
- determining a student's disability status,
- developing high-quality programs with limited resources,
- understanding the procedural requirements of IDEA,
- getting forthright information from parents about a child's disability, and
- obtaining records from students' previous schools (Rhim, 2008; Jackson, 2003).

Regular public schools also struggle with many of these challenges; however, the issues tend to be more pronounced and widespread in charter schools (Rhim, 2008).

Research has shown that a charter school's *legal identity* plays a significant role in its ability to serve students with disabilities effectively. Whereas traditional public schools are governed entirely by local educational agencies (LEAs), charter schools often are not. Defined loosely as "an entity that has responsibility for the education of all children who reside within a designated geographical area of a state" (NASDSE, 2008, p. 1), LEAs are typically well established; thus, they can offer a plethora of experience for navigating the various local, state, and Federal mandates for providing special education services. In addition, LEAs have the benefit of access to all the resources afforded by the state and Federal governments and have experience in distributing these resources to meet the needs of their students with disabilities. Therefore, the legal identity of a traditional public school as a component of the LEA makes the linkage between the traditional public school and the LEA fairly clear and defined (Lange et al., 2008).

In contrast, charter schools' legal identities and linkages to their local LEAs are often less clear. Project SEARCH, a three-year qualitative study that examined special education in charter schools, found that state charter school policies or other state policies define the legal status of a charter school in terms of affiliation to the LEA (Jackson, 2003). Some states mandate that charter schools are part of their local LEAs (Rhim, Ahearn, Lange, & McLaughlin, 2006), providing them with some degree of leverage to negotiate shared responsibilities in carrying out

the requirements of IDEA (Jackson, 2003). Other states consider charter schools to be completely independent LEAs, making them wholly responsible for implementing special education services for their students with disabilities (Rhim et al., 2006). Other states allow charter schools to determine their own status through negotiations between the school, the LEA, and, in some cases, the authorizer that sponsored the school (NASDSE, 2008). In addition, some states may assign alternative legal identities to a charter school for different purposes, identifying them as independent entities for special education but as part of the LEA for other purposes (Lange et al., 2008).

Schools recognized as their own LEAs will have greater programmatic and financial responsibilities than those determined to be part of another LEA. For instance, charters considered to be a part of existing LEAs will have access to that LEA's legal office, professional development training, and human resources (Jackson, 2003), which provides tremendous assistance in carrying out activities related to IDEA. However, strong linkages with LEAs may not have an impact or can be damaging to charters if the LEA's own support for special education services is limited or of low quality. For instance, in New Orleans, the loss of students' IEPs in Hurricane Katrina in 2005 has meant that even special education students in regular public schools face challenges in receiving the services they need (Ed Daily, 2010). Further, schools without linkages to LEAs with strong experience in providing special education services are often on their own in finding access to such supports. In addition, individuals responsible for these charter schools may also be subject to different funding formulas, which may limit the material and financial resources available to them to implement special education services (NASDSE, 2008).

The Importance of Infrastructure

Charter schools without the internal capacity enjoyed by strong linkages to LEAs to provide special education services have sought to develop alternative strategies to help consolidate and streamline existing resources. This effort would allow them to efficiently serve students with disabilities in accordance with the regulations of IDEA. Specifically, charter schools often attempt to develop or affiliate with an infrastructure that allows the provision or sharing of resources and personnel between the charter school and another entity. These infrastructures allow the charter school to use the knowledge of these entities, either alone or in conjunction with other charter schools, without having to devote the resources to develop or acquire them exclusively (Rhim et al., 2006). Project Intersect, a three-year study funded by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, has studied these models extensively and has identified four infrastructure types, which can be identified by the entity serving primarily in the coordination role for the charter schools:

- A local education agency (the authorizer)

- A state education agency (the shared director program)
- A special education cooperative
- An education service provider (special education service company)

In addition to identifying and differentiating these four models, this research also highlighted several areas of overlap among the different types of infrastructures. To serve their purpose of “provid[ing] a charter school with fiscal, human, legal, and organizational capacity that is otherwise virtually impossible to amass in a single school” (Rhim, Lange, & Ahearn, 2005, p. 11), research describes several components that must be present for the infrastructure to be successful:

- An understanding of the national and local policy context
- Identification of the needs of the charter school and students
- Identification of external resources to meet these needs
- Implementation and utilization of effective leadership
- Explicit roles for all responsible parties
- A leveraging of mutual interests (Rhim et al., 2006)

The Cooperative Model

This study focuses exclusively on the third type of infrastructure identified by the Project Intersect research—the special education cooperative. Cooperatives are quite common among public schools and often utilized in non-charter school environments for serving students with disabilities. Some districts or states require public schools to buy into a shared risk pool, often referred to as a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) or a Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA), to ensure efficient and adequate provision of special education services (Rhim et al., 2006). In other areas, particularly rural regions, schools or districts may voluntarily create such cooperatives (Fletcher, 1988; Widerstrom, 1986) to share scarce personnel and resources to serve students with disabilities.

Many charters seek affiliation with a special education cooperative to provide all or some of the capacity needed to comply with federal and state special education requirements (Rhim et al., 2006). The purpose of these cooperatives is “to pool their resources, distribute risk, and maximize their special education expertise and resources” (Rhim, 2008, p. 15). Members of these cooperatives are typically small charter schools or even smaller school districts (Ahearn, Lange, Rhim, & McLaughlin, 2001), and members generally join voluntarily and pay an annual fee to access the services available through the cooperative (Rhim, 2008). Additionally, some cooperatives require charter school members to obtain LEA status prior to granting cooperative membership so “the charter school owns responsibility for meeting the individual needs of all students with disabilities who enroll in that school” (Rhim et al., 2006, p. 27).

Research has noted several specific benefits that charter schools receive from these cooperatives in providing special education services. For instance, cooperatives can give charters increased access to more and higher quality, specialists who offer special education and related services. It is difficult for small charter schools to fund and support full-time specialists on their own; through the cooperative, they can share their resources to recruit and staff highly qualified specialists across participating school sites. On a related note, small charter schools participating in a cooperative can also share other resources that might not otherwise be accessible. For instance, it might not be feasible for a single charter with five students with severe disabilities to acquire certain technologies for use in only its own classrooms. However, pooling resources to purchase such equipment for 30 students with similar needs across several school sites is more plausible, and a better use of schools' limited resources. Further, a qualified cooperative leader offers the charter schools a resource to help with other special education-related needs. This individual can work with the charters in deciphering Federal and state special education regulations, negotiating with the LEA on resource sharing and other issues, and communicating emerging research about special education to the charters (Ahearn et al., 2001).

Research has noted some key factors that need to be in place for a special education cooperative to be successful, including commitment and active participation from the members and a strong and effective leader (Ahearn et al., 2001). In this study, we examine the role that these factors and others play in the successful establishment and operation of special education cooperatives.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify specific examples of, and summarize information about, existing special education cooperatives nationwide. The project team sought to include a range of cooperatives that represent different regions of the country, membership sizes, and types of locations (e.g., rural, suburban, urban). The team then conducted telephone interviews with representatives from each identified cooperative and analyzed the data using traditional qualitative research techniques. Details about the sample, data collection, and analysis procedures follow.

Sample

The study team followed several steps to identify the cooperatives for participation in the study. First, study team members conducted intensive research reviews and web searches for publicly available information about existing cooperatives. Team members then reached out to experts identified through these reviews for further information about study candidates. Finally, team members solicited information directly from charter schools via the National Charter School Resource Center website and newsletter contacts. The team then contacted leadership at each

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cooperative to learn more about the cooperative and gauge its willingness to participate in the study. Finally, the team consulted with leadership at each cooperative to identify the appropriate interview candidate(s) to meet the purposes of the study.

A total of nine special education cooperatives were identified. Seven of the cooperatives were still in operation, one was no longer in operation, and one did not respond and the status remains unknown. The team identified 24 individuals for interviews, and a total of 19 individuals participated in interviews. Representatives from eight of the nine cooperatives identified participated in this research.

A total of 19 individuals who have been or currently are involved in special education cooperatives participated in interviews. Representatives interviewed fell into one of four categories: key informant, founder, executive director, and member. Five key informants had vast experience starting and working with at least one special education collaborative. Four of the five key informants were also founders, and three out of the four were currently acting as executive directors of cooperatives. Six participants were founders of a special education collaborative. Three of the founders were also executive directors. Nine participants were currently executive directors of the cooperatives. Three of the nine executive directors are also founders. Last, four of the participants were members of the cooperatives and from charter schools served by the cooperatives. Exhibit 1 provides a detailed explanation of the number and type of interviews conducted.

Exhibit 1: Participating Special Education Cooperatives and Interviewees

Type	# Interviewees	Notes
ALL INTERVIEWS	19	<i>"Type of Participant" categories are not mutually exclusive</i>
Type of Participant	# Interviewees	Notes
Key informants	5	<i>4 of the 5 were also founders 3 of the five were also executive directors</i>
Founders	6	<i>3 of the 6 founders were also executive directors</i>
Executive Directors	9	<i>3 of the 9 executive directors were also founders</i>
Members	4	

The team collected publicly available information about the entity prior to the interview and used that information to tailor the interview protocol so that it most specifically addressed the relevant issues pertaining to that cooperative.

Data Collection

The study team began by developing a protocol of questions to guide the one-hour telephone interview to be conducted with each participating cooperative. These questions were developed after an extensive review of available information about special education cooperatives and were subjected to several rounds of peer review and approval from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) prior to finalization. This protocol, which is included in Appendix A of this report, was adapted slightly, as necessary, to address the specific role of the person being interviewed.

All interviews were conducted in November and December of 2010. Prior to the interviews, candidates received a consent form detailing their rights as an interview participant in this study. Candidates were informed that their acknowledgment of receipt of this document and subsequent participation in the interviews served as their assent to allow their data to be used in the study. All interviews were tape-recorded to assist in the accuracy of taking notes. A note taker was assigned to each call and used the recording to complete a semi-verbatim transcription of the conversation approximately 48 hours after the call. The interviewer then reviewed the transcript, made corrections, and identified areas in need of further detail. The note taker revised and finalized the notes in preparation for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Once note takers completed the transcriptions, interviewers completed an additional review of the notes. This process included highlighting and coding transcripts for key themes and for particularly poignant quotations. The interviewers classified pieces of the conversations into topical clusters using Microsoft Excel, allowing the study team to analyze the findings across interviews. The study team met weekly to review the themes that emerged, discuss any issues or questions related to the interviews, and prepare for the report development.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify common factors that facilitate the establishment and sustained operation of special education cooperatives for charter schools and to propose implementation steps for charter schools to consider if interested in starting a similar cooperative. In this section, we describe findings that emerged from our review of data collected from individuals representing nine charter school special education cooperatives around the country. These cooperatives varied in size, region, structure, and sustainability; the findings below reflect lessons learned about the factors that promoted success, as well as factors that served as barriers or challenges to sustaining the cooperative.

The findings are organized into two sections—(1) essential factors, in which we identify critical factors that need to be in place to ensure successful start-up and sustainability of a special

education cooperative; and (2) typology of cooperatives, in which we describe three common types of cooperatives, varying along a continuum of intensity in terms of the level of commitment required from members (financial and governance role) and the range of benefits provided.

Essential Factors

Five factors were identified as essential for the successful cooperatives that participated in this study: (1) strong “bottom-up” commitment from members upon start-up; (2) skilled, knowledgeable, and committed leadership; (3) strong sense of trust and positive relationships among cooperative members and their leadership; (4) geographic proximity among cooperative members; and (5) adequate, sustainable funding. The data show that the presence of these five factors is critical for ensuring both a successful start-up of the cooperative and long-term sustainability.

“Bottom-up” commitment from members

Leaders of charter school cooperatives indicated that “good co-ops are built on front line needs” that are shared by the member schools themselves. This commitment is drawn from a shared investment on the part of all partner schools and a shared value for the services that the cooperative provides. Charter schools may come together in cooperatives to generally support their special education efforts, or there may be more specific issues that cooperatives are designed to address. For instance, at least four of the participating cooperatives were developed to allow sharing of service providers or knowledge about best practices across charter schools in a given region.

The motivation to commit to starting up a cooperative in the charter cooperatives that participated in the study came from a perceived need. The perceived need came from one or more of the following factors: a citation for non-compliance, the limited experience of special education staff, a professional learning community to connect to colleagues in like positions, a need to strengthen the connection to existing special education infrastructure (e.g., Federal, state, and district services and supports), and a need to better serve more students through shared services. One cooperative member discussed her motivation to band together with other charter schools:

Being a special educator in a charter school, I noticed there is a lot of emphasis on general education. The special education teacher is sort of seen as the expert no matter if you are in the first, second, or seventh year of teaching. They assume you know more than anyone else in your field. ... You are left on your own, which can be isolating. ... We all talked to each other and got more and more [special education coordinators] together to tackle big issues to work with

districts, states, attorneys and our school leaders and be that support for each other. ... Paperwork, monitoring, compliance, working with students with low-incidence disabilities, we all had those hot topic issues.

Still, start-up is a critical phase, and garnering commitment can be particularly challenging for a group of charter schools because of the nature and demands of charter schools. One cooperative member explained: “Each building is a charter school because they all have different philosophies and mentalities.”

Once a cooperative is past the start-up, the leaders and members need to maintain a level of commitment to sustain the organization. Many of the cooperative leaders and members discussed the evolving nature of the organization. It is, after all, an organization designed to meet the needs of members; thus, changes in membership and needs from year-to-year have an impact on the direction and focus of the cooperative. Several of the cooperatives discussed either expanding the services and benefits offered or cutting back services on the basis of member interest.

One member discussed the ebb and flow of the direction of the cooperative: “After the seed money was gone, [the cooperative] went to a model without a director. It was at the end of the second year of the...grant that [the members] decided [to make the change].”

Additionally, staff turnover among member schools and leadership turnover in the cooperative can also influence the direction of the cooperative. One cooperative leader noted:

Any time you get a new leader it's a challenge. A lot of times the people are put in a position they don't have a lot of leadership and administrative experience, or they are so experienced and set in their ways they have difficulty. ...

Another cooperative member stated: “I think [the cooperative] has a different personality depending on [where you are at].”

In each cooperative, leaders and members described developing infrastructures whereby the partner schools drive the work and the school leaders continue to have input about their changing needs for the cooperative. One cooperative with a large number of partner schools used a survey to identify common needs among members to ensure that the entity continued to meet their collective needs. Another cooperative used informal measures, such as identifying member needs during each meeting. Some cooperatives have used technical assistance centers or other external organizations to help find solutions for issues that member schools identify needing help with.

Skilled, knowledgeable, and committed leadership

In all cases, the start-up and sustained operation of the cooperatives depended on the involvement and skills of a special education expert. In fact, several traits were particularly

important for a cooperative leader: a deep commitment to special education; a desire to support charter schools; a willingness to navigate the “mine fields” involved with carrying out a cooperative; and an extensive knowledge of special education policy (local, state and Federal) and the political environment. Most important, members noted that it is valuable for these leaders to have longstanding and trusting relationships with other stakeholders in the local community to connect the charter school members to the existing special education infrastructure, policies, and practices. At the start-up, these leaders played a critical role in convening charter school members. As one member noted: “Startups always need both a mentor in the field and financial support. It’s harder for standalone charter schools to implement special education on their own without any support.”

Another experienced cooperative leader stated: “First, you need the right person to run [the cooperative], someone with a deep commitment to it every day.”

Leadership is also critical to sustaining the cooperative. Cooperatives obtained their leadership by identifying leaders with extensive experience or by transferring the skills of the experienced leaders to members. In at least three of the cooperatives, the leader was identified as key to sustaining the cooperative. One member noted:

[The director/leader] is really masterful. ... Without [the director’s] leadership the cooperative wouldn’t exist. And she has a set of skills that very few people have that I have ever met. She’s got relationships. ... She has relationships with people in Washington; she has relationships with people at the state level that are in charge of chartering all the agencies that are charter schools. And, it’s not uncommon for her to have to use those resources when we get stuck between a rock and a hard place. ...

At least five of the cooperatives used central leaders for the first several years of the cooperative, then transferred control to some sort of shared leadership structure from within the member schools. At that point, the leaders had built strong infrastructures in these school leaders who could take over the day-to-day operation and sustainability of the cooperative. This practice tends to be particularly successful when the leadership at the member schools has remained relatively stable. As one cooperative leader stated: “If you want to start a co-op, you need to get someone in there to lead the charge until you get someone empowered in there to keep them going.”

Trust and relationships

Participants suggested that just as leaders must have strong feelings of trust with community stakeholders, the member schools need to have strong relationships among themselves to ensure the successful start-up and sustainability of cooperatives. Data indicated that cooperatives are

started either by the schools themselves because they recognize a common need for providing special education services or by external organizations that bring the schools together around the special education cause. Several interviewees noted that their charter schools had existing relationships with other area charter schools prior to beginning the cooperative and that those relationships had been key factors in securing their shared commitment to the endeavor.

Some charters may resist joining cooperatives, however. Charter schools are often seeking greater autonomy and independence from the traditional school setting, and joining a cooperative with compliance responsibilities may seem undesirable. One cooperative struggled to find members because the area's charters "just couldn't realize that they weren't going to lose their individual identity to be a part of a co-op for special ed services." Additionally, cooperative leaders and members noted that establishing a shared view of commitment to the work of the cooperative and a belief that all member schools would be "towing their own weight" as far as their contributions to the cooperative's collective goals was imperative.

Cooperative leaders and members highlighted several strategies that enabled them to build these relationships. Several cooperatives were supported by the services of an external agency that acted as a bridge between member organizations. This entity often secured or provided seed money to start the cooperative, found resources that were used to pay for hiring cooperative staff, or supported gatherings of member schools to increase familiarity between member schools. Almost all participating cooperatives described using face-to-face meetings, especially in the beginning, to help foster this trust. These meetings allow member leaders to come together and develop a shared viewpoint not just on special education matters, but "they talk about lots of other things and they become friends, comrades, colleagues in the group."

Maintaining the relationships among members is equally important to sustaining cooperatives. Regular communication among school leadership is particularly valuable but may be difficult to sustain if there is turnover in these positions among member schools. At least three participating cooperatives described a group of member schools that were already acquainted and "very well networked" prior to start-up, which can make sustaining sustainability easier. Cooperative leaders suggested that members should emphasize regular communication with cooperative leadership as well as among members to ensure that all needs are being met and should be prepared to meet regularly around any issues that arise. In fact, a participating cooperative that had failed did so because members had not established relationships because of a lack of communication. Therefore, cooperatives should be attuned to the development of strong relationships among member organizations throughout the duration of the cooperative.

Geographic proximity

Building strong relationships across member charter schools and other stakeholders can be facilitated by geographic proximity. Interviewees described the benefits to carrying out a

successful cooperative with schools in a close geographic area: closer proximity correlates with similarities in student populations, shared perspective on local issues, and common challenges to address. In addition, this close proximity allows greater ease in sharing service providers and resources and in coming together for face-to-face meetings.

The physical closeness of schools to one another does not automatically lead to a successful cooperative, though. One interviewee described a cooperative (whose representatives were not included in this study sample) in a large, urban area whose member schools were located within several blocks of one another. The leaders came together for in-person meetings regularly to discuss the cooperative; however, they failed to develop shared goals or trusting relationships and the cooperative failed. In essence, although the schools had physical closeness, this proximity did not lead to their viewing themselves as a shared entity. Alternatively, several cooperative leaders interviewed noted that their focus on keeping schools engaged even though they are at a greater geographic distance from the other members has contributed to their cooperatives' continued success. They described using technology, such as email and listservs, to maintain communication and scheduling meetings and other gatherings with these distance issues in mind.

Adequate and sustainable funding

Challenges with funding to provide adequate special education resources and services are often one of the primary catalysts for developing charter school cooperatives. Several interviewees noted that the funds charter schools receive for special education services are not sufficient to provide services to meet the needs of their students.

Funding for starting up a cooperative is distinct from sustaining the operation of a cooperative. During the start-up, at least six of the cooperatives secured funding to be used as seed money—from private, state, or Federal sources or from some sort of host agency—to get the cooperative “off the ground.” The participating cooperative leaders indicated that this funding allowed members to explore options, access special education experts, and make key decisions about the purpose of the cooperative. The initial funding was critical to the development of the cooperatives.

Sustaining cooperatives requires an ongoing funding source, beyond seed money. Among the eight participating cooperatives, six were funded by member dues and two were funded by shared cost arrangements among the members. In two cases, the revenue from member dues was supplemented by private funds. In two cooperatives, members shared the cost of running the cooperative by agreement. In several cases, the future plans of the cooperative included increasing funding to provide additional benefits to members.

Leaders universally agreed that cooperatives need well-defined financial agreements and plans for all members to ensure long-term fiscal solvency. To this end, there is a need to balance the services offered within the constraints of revenue from funding sources. In particular, it is important that member schools see the value of sharing their limited funds with the cooperative to ensure their continued membership. Interviewees with knowledge about discontinued cooperatives noted that failure to provide adequate services or to communicate the benefits of cooperative membership to paying member schools was believed to be a major contributor to the failure of the cooperative.

Typology of Cooperatives

Although many essential factors exist across all successful cooperatives, our research also showed differences among cooperatives in terms of the qualifications of membership, the range of benefits provided, the infrastructure, and the funding mechanisms. This variation can be characterized in terms of a continuum of intensity ranging from “low intensity” cooperatives, which require relatively low financial and time commitment from members and provide a relatively limited range of benefits, to “high intensity” cooperatives, which have strict membership requirements and provide a very broad range of benefits.

For example, a typical low-intensity cooperative imposes either no or limited barriers to entry for members, provides some benefits such as staff development and technical assistance, has no non-member staff overseeing the work of the cooperative, and is funded through dues. In contrast, a typical high-intensity cooperative has strict barriers to entry (e.g., review of a school’s financial viability) and, in addition to staff development, has specialists who provide direct services to students in member schools. A “medium intensity” cooperative has higher barriers to entry than a low-intensity cooperative (e.g., higher member fees, a memorandum of understanding), has a limited number of non-member staff overseeing the work of the cooperative, and is funded through dues and other external funds (e.g., grants).

Exhibit 2 provides a brief summary of a typology of special education cooperatives. While it is clear that there is a continuum in the characteristics of cooperatives between those types that are low and high intensity in terms of the key domains of membership, benefits, infrastructure, and funding, the cooperatives that participated in this research fell into one of the three categories, with limited exceptions in a given domain.

Exhibit 2: Typology of Charter Schools’ Special Education Cooperatives

	Low Intensity	Medium Intensity	High Intensity
Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership dues (usually low cost) • No review of new members by existing members (if dues are paid, the school is considered a member) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership dues • Application (minimal) • Memorandum of understanding focused on the vision of the cooperative • Limited or no review of new members by existing members (if dues are paid, the school is considered a member) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application • Signed contract/agreement to pool resources and share costs • Approval by existing members required for new members • Specific obligations (e.g., meeting attendance) that members must meet
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development • Technical assistance (group) • Legal guidance • Support to member school special education staff (no direct services to staff or students) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development • Technical assistance (group and one on one) • Legal guidance • Brokered specialists, as needed • Outreach to community to integrate services with member schools • Direct services to member schools and member school staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development • Technical assistance (group and one on one) • Legal guidance and counsel • On-staff specialists • Outreach to community to integrate services with member schools • Direct services to students
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member-elected officers and other members who manage the cooperative with limited or no support from non-members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member-elected officers • A staff person (e.g., executive director) who manages the cooperative, led by member-elected officers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member-elected officers • A staff person (e.g., executive director) who manages the cooperative and oversees other staff • On-staff specialists who provide direct services to students in member schools
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership dues (limited by lower dues) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership dues • Supplemental funding from grants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared costs (divided among members) • Pooled special education funds

Among the eight cooperatives that participated in this study, three are considered low intensity, three are medium intensity, and two are high intensity cooperatives. The following sections describe each of these types in terms of the key domains (membership, benefits, infrastructure, and funding) and thus are organized to address each domain in greater detail.

Membership

The degree to which there are barriers to entry into the cooperative differ in terms of type. Low-intensity cooperatives have low barriers to entry and minimal requirements for members. As the intensity of the cooperative increases, so do the barriers to entry. For example, in medium-intensity cooperatives, the membership dues were higher, so members more carefully considered the benefits of joining the cooperative. In high-intensity cooperatives, significant attention is paid to which charter schools become members; thus, these cooperatives tended to have fewer members.

Low-intensity cooperatives. In the three low-intensity cooperatives, the membership fees were low (approximately \$200 per school) and the level of participation among members varied, depending on the willingness of members to participate. The members and leaders alike indicated that there were no real barriers to becoming a member of the cooperative if a school expressed interest. As one low-intensity cooperative member explained: “We have never had a school that [said], ‘No, I don’t want to join because the [coop] fees. ...’” Additionally, the nature of the low-intensity cooperative places minimal requirements on members; thus, a charter school might join and selectively participate in the portions of the cooperative that meet its needs. According to one respondent: “People that pay the fee don’t always come to the meetings.”

Medium-intensity cooperatives. In the two medium-intensity cooperatives that participated in the study, the qualifications for membership were moderate (ranging from approximately \$650 to \$2,500 per school), and the requirements of members varied. As long as members pay the fees and, in some cases, signed a memorandum of understanding, they are considered members. As with the low-intensity cooperatives, there is limited consideration by existing members as to whether new members are eligible join. In the past, both of the medium-intensity cooperatives had a memorandum of understanding that members were required to sign; only one currently requires members to sign a memorandum of understanding. In both cases, however, the memorandum of understanding was less like signing a contract and more like signing on to a vision of the quality of services for the students with disabilities within member schools. According to respondents, there were no participation requirements (e.g., attend meetings) or other obligations of this type for membership.

High-intensity cooperatives. In the three high-intensity cooperatives, becoming a member requires a significant obligation from individual members as well as careful consideration by existing members. Each of three high-intensity cooperatives that participated in the study required members to contribute significant resources to the cooperative. As one high-intensity leader explained: “Basically, [members] put all the money into the pot. ... We pool monies, liabilities and resources.” In order to commit to this type of cooperative, members must believe that they will get a return on their investment and have a degree of trust that the other members share a common vision for service to students with disabilities. Current members must similarly

consider the viability of potential members’ financial solvency (e.g., the member has funding set aside for special education services). This became clear as one member of a high-intensity cooperative described member schools that had left the cooperative:

[T]rust was a major issue, and one of them ... that is no longer in the [cooperative] ... because the majority of [members] felt like [the] school wasn’t towing [its] weight. They weren’t showing up to meetings, they weren’t participating in actively pursuing the goals of the consortium. And, so, they were kind of a drag on the system.

Additionally, members are required to participate in a majority of the collaborative meetings and may be withdrawn from the cooperative if they fail to meet this expectation.

Benefits

The benefits for participating members vary significantly depending on the intensity level of the cooperative. In low-intensity cooperatives, the members benefit from professional development, compliance-oriented technical assistance, like-job discussions during meetings, and informal sharing of practices and service providers. Medium-intensity cooperatives provide these opportunities as well as the active identification of service providers to serve common needs of schools and some one-on-one support for member schools and the special education staff. While the medium-intensity cooperatives may identify and broker service providers based on school needs, they do not offer direct services to students. In the high-intensity cooperatives, the service providers are hired on the basis of the existing needs of member schools, the needs of member-schools are actively integrated into the current and future plans of the cooperative, and these cooperatives provide direct services to students in member schools. The following provides a detailed description of the benefits by the intensity of the cooperative.

Low-intensity cooperatives. “People get out of [the cooperative] what they want, and what they put into it,” explained one of the low-intensity members when discussing member benefits. Exhibit 3 provides a summary list of benefits offered to low-intensity cooperative members.

Exhibit 3: Benefits Offered by Participating Low-Intensity Cooperatives

Benefits
Community of practice/sharing practices
Professional development
Technical assistance
Provider Fair
Shared documents
Advocacy
Online list serve

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The three low-intensity cooperatives appear to be closer to a community brought together to break from the isolation of working on special education in individual charter schools and to learn from colleagues in similar positions in other charter schools. A low-intensity cooperative member explained: "...it's harder for standalone charter schools to implement special education on their own without any support. ...". The range of member benefits differed among the three cooperatives, as each was responsive to its own memberships' needs. For example, one of the cooperative members stated that the focus of the cooperative was to develop an infrastructure and resources for members. With that in mind, the cooperative provided professional development that addressed compliance and legal issues as well as training modules that are accessible to members online. Additionally, the cooperative offered standard documents for documenting special education services. In another cooperative, the focus was driven entirely by members during the meetings. For example, the co-chair (member) of the cooperative described how each meeting begins with "[going] around [to] find out from each person what's happening at their schools, how special education services are working and what they are looking for. ...". After such a meeting, a few of the members discussed strategic decisions about service delivery at the most recent meeting. Moving forward, the group will set aside time to talk about this issue over the course of the next few months.

As far as identifying and sharing service providers, the cooperative served as an opportunity for members to informally share information. Anecdotally, the participants described instances when informal sharing of providers occurred, but at the time of the interviews, low-intensity cooperatives were not interested in pursuing this area.

The participant members described the low-intensity cooperatives as being both proactive and reactive to the member school: "Right now we do training and will do it in the summer next year so we can be proactive, but it's also reactive if there is an issue a particular school is trying to work through ... [members] can bring up those through the cooperative structure." Another respondent described the design of the cooperative as a reactionary model:

Members can come to meetings and get help with challenges and issues that are immediate. To what degree does the co-op help schools to be prepared for diverse student needs coming in? Not at this state, yet. ... We are reactionary in that sense.

Medium-intensity cooperatives. The two cooperatives that are characterized as medium-intensity offered a wide range of services for providing group and one-on-one support for members. Exhibit 4 presents a detailed list of the benefits offered to medium-intensity cooperative members.

Exhibit 4: Benefits Offered by Participating Medium-Intensity Cooperatives

Benefits
Community of practice/sharing practices
Professional development
Technical assistance
Legal advice/compliance issues
Advocacy
Medicaid billing
Communications (e.g., newsletter)
Help Desk/Hotline for one-on-one, customized special education support
Service provider guide
Identification and brokering of service providers

The medium-intensity cooperatives offered a range of services to member schools; however, they did not provide direct services to students. Rather, the medium-intensity cooperative members focused on building the capacity of member schools’ staff to serve students with disabilities. As one of the medium-intensity cooperatives explained: “We don’t deliver, but design services.” Indeed, designing services entailed ensuring that member schools understood the special education legal and compliance requirements through professional development and training. Also, these cooperatives used communications and one-on-one interactions to help their members understand best practices and the range of approaches for serving students with disabilities. Last, the cooperatives worked as advocates and brokers for members by making strong connections with state and local district representatives and by identifying providers to support the common needs of members (e.g., behavioral therapists). As one leader described: “The cooperative needs to grow resources outside of the school as well as inside as it develops and connects with community based structures.”

The medium-intensity cooperatives deliver services to members by building their capacity, rather than providing direct services to students. One cooperative leader explained:

We tend to do more work on the ground level with the people who are actually implementing services on a day to day basis. ... We have been so focused on helping the people who are doing the work, do their work. ... We just want them to get it done and do it well ... and so that has really been our niche, our role.

High-intensity cooperatives. Within the typology, high-intensity cooperatives offer the most significant benefits to members, including staff development, one-on-one support, and direct services to students. Exhibit 5 lists the benefits offered by the three high-intensity cooperatives¹ that participated in the study. The high-intensity cooperatives share resources and all benefits by creating economies of scale to serve the member schools. As one high-intensity leader stated: "...we pool monies, liabilities, and resources."

Exhibit 5: Benefits Offered by Participating High-Intensity Cooperatives

Benefits
Community of practice/sharing practices
Professional development
Technical assistance
Legal advice/compliance issues
Advocacy
Communications (e.g., newsletter)
Help Desk/Hotline for one-on-one, customized special education support
On-staff service providers (e.g., occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech and language therapist, nursing services)
Direct services to students

By sharing the risk and benefits, member schools' staff increase their professional capacity, and students receive direct, quality services. According to one high-intensity cooperative leader: "Student services were delivered consistently, met student needs and high expectations" and "A lot of schools that are not a part of a cooperative don't have the level of services the cooperative is able to provide." A member of another cooperative discussed the importance of this benefit to a charter school, stating:

¹ Two of the three high-intensity cooperatives are still in operation. One of the cooperatives was discontinued.

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As a start up school, we started with 120 students, and there is no way with that many students to provide the range of services needed for special education. I would say that without the [cooperative] I wouldn't have taken this job [as special education coordinator of the school] myself.

Cooperative leaders and members indicate that there are long-term benefits to being part of a cooperative. While, cooperative leaders and members reported that without pooling resources it would be difficult to serve students and meet their needs, they explained that the benefit of sharing resources and benefits can be challenging because of each member school's shifting needs. According to one cooperative leader:

Services and money are not evenly distributed to the schools. They are distributed based on the needs of the kids attending the schools. ... So, for example, one school has two special education kids. Last year they had fifteen. It's just a fluke of the year. ... You get services based on the needs of the student population.

Still, the advantage to providing direct services to students is best summed up by a founder of a cooperative: "It really helps charter schools [to] have experts in the field at a reasonable price. If [the schools] were to hire on their own, the price would not be something they could manage or afford." By having the services available within the cooperative the member schools were, for the most part, prepared to serve the students who entered their schools and indicated that they were proactively able to support students, instead of reacting to unforeseen student needs.

Infrastructure

All types of cooperatives are administered by members through established governance structures. Differences among the cooperative types are reflected in how they are staffed and whether member charter schools had to become LEAs. Although each type has an individual who leads by coordinating the work of the cooperative, how this role is structured differs among the types. Low-intensity cooperatives are coordinated by volunteer (i.e., unpaid) members serving in the leadership role; medium- and high-intensity cooperatives have a paid director as well as other staff who support cooperatives. Only low-intensity cooperatives included charter school members that were part of the traditional school district (LEA). Medium- and high-intensity cooperatives required all members to become their own LEAs before becoming members.

The following is a detailed description of the differences among the types of cooperatives.

Low-intensity cooperatives. The low-intensity cooperatives are managed by volunteer members, have no paid staff, and consist of member charter schools that were part of their

district (not their own LEA). While the start-up of each of these cooperatives began with the support of a paid special education expert, after the first year of start-up, there were no paid staff. These cooperatives are operated and led solely by the member schools of the cooperative. Member leaders reported spending anywhere between 5 and 20 hours a month on cooperative-related activities. To date, members have not received any sort of stipend to lead the cooperative. In the three low-intensity cooperatives, none of the charter schools was its own LEA.

Medium-intensity cooperatives. The medium-intensity cooperatives each had one or two individuals who worked either part- or full-time for the cooperative, and member charter schools were required to be their own LEA. At least one of these individuals served as an executive director and the other individual either shared the executive director's responsibilities or provided administrative support to the cooperative. These individuals' salaries were funded by the cooperative. In each medium-intensity cooperative, the staff possessed an extensive background and expertise in special education and served the cooperative as expert, facilitator, coordinator, communicator, and advocate. In each case, to become a member, each charter school first had to serve as its own LEA.

High-intensity cooperatives. The high-intensity cooperatives had an executive director as well as specialists on staff who served the member schools, which were required to be their own LEA for acceptance into the cooperative. These staff members were funded by the cooperative. The executive director operated similarly as in the medium-intensity cooperatives, functioning as expert, facilitator, coordinator, communicator, and advocate, as well as the manager of the specialists. The specialists were hired on the basis of the needs of students in the member schools, and these specialists set schedules to support students in member schools throughout the school year.

Funding

Funding provides the basis for each type of cooperative, with the primary source of funding coming from members in all cooperatives. In some cases, however, cooperatives received start-up funding and in other instances they relied on other sources of funding (e.g., private foundations) to supplement members' contributions.

The amount of funding that members are obligated to contribute also accounts for differences among cooperative types. In low-intensity cooperatives, the member dues are minimal. In medium-intensity cooperatives, the member dues are more substantial so that members must carefully consider the cost and benefits of participation. Finally, the financial obligation of members is significantly higher in the high-intensity cooperatives; these contributions fund the substantial infrastructure such as the executive director and specialists.

Low-intensity cooperatives. Member dues are the primary and only source of funding for low-intensity cooperatives. The dues are minimal to encourage participation of many charter school members. The dues pay for professional development opportunities and meetings entirely, and none of the funding is used for staffing.

Medium-intensity cooperatives. Member dues combined with other sources of funding (e.g., grants, foundation funds) provide the primary sources of revenue for medium-intensity cooperatives. The membership dues, which are higher than in the low-intensity cooperatives, support the dedicated cooperative staff (executive director and others) as well as the benefits offered to members (e.g., communications, advocacy).

High-intensity cooperatives. The high-intensity cooperatives were funded by pooled resources of each individual charter school member. Members shared the total cost of the cooperative staff and services. Before becoming a member, each school member agreed to share the costs either by dividing the cost equally among members or by applying a graduated payment plan where larger schools paid a larger share than the smaller schools. The funding source of high-intensity cooperatives is identified as one of the most challenging aspects of this type of cooperative. One cooperative founder explained:

Letting go of some of that money. This is what created a problem in [another city]; the [charter schools] just couldn't realize that they weren't going to lose their individual identity to be a part of a co-op for special education services.

Another cooperative leader explained: “The problem with [pooling money] is it’s much harder to get somebody to pool money if they have no faith in who they are pooling money with.”

Conclusion

The findings in this study suggest that the special education cooperative model can assist charter school members in supporting their ability to serve students with disabilities. However, essential factors must be in place or developed prior to start-up for a cooperative to be successful. Additionally, charter schools considering a special education cooperative model should be clear about the type of cooperative they are interested in developing.

Essential factors

Charter schools should consider the five essential and inter-related factors identified in the findings:

- Strong “bottom-up” commitment from members
- Skilled, knowledgeable, and committed leadership
- Strong sense of trust and positive relationships among member schools
- Geographic proximity among cooperative members
- Adequate, sustainable funding.

When reviewing these factors, charter schools must decide what they will need to start up and what they will need to sustain operations. They need to develop a plan to meet these short- and long-term needs.

Bottom-up commitment is critical to starting and sustaining the cooperative. To maintain commitment, the cooperative must embed strategies to identify and address member schools’ needs. During the start-up phase, needs assessments were developed through formal or informal processes. For example, in one cooperative, formal needs assessments consisting of interviews and document reviews were conducted in each charter school for the year prior to convening a cooperative. The results were used to identify common needs and garner the commitment of charter schools to join the cooperative. In other cases, informal processes were used to identify needs, or individual charter schools were aware of needs and the cooperative’s goals met these needs; thus, they enlisted the commitment of these schools. After start-up, the common needs can become the core of the cooperative, but in many cases the common needs evolved as members’ capacity and skills increased and as new member joined. It is clear that for a cooperative to remain viable and maintain a “bottom-up” commitment, it is important to continually seek information about members’ needs and plan strategies to address those needs.

Skilled, knowledgeable, and committed leadership are most important in the start-up and can also improve the sustainability of a cooperative. During start-up, the leader’s expertise can foster member commitment and trust. Initially, the leader can help address the immediate needs of charter schools in terms of limited experience and isolation of special education staff. For example, a leader of one cooperative who had decades of experience working at the school, district, and state level was an asset to charter school members because she could guide them through the special education compliance issues, as well as provide guidance on how to serve students. In the longer term, the cooperatives may maintain a connection to the leader, but as the members’ capacity grows, the role of the leader may change. For example, in at least four of the cooperatives in this study, the leaders were highly involved in the start-up of the cooperatives, but later began serving the cooperative on a part-time or as-needed basis.

A strong sense of trust among charter school members is important throughout the lifecycle of a cooperative but will likely change over time. At start-up, cooperative members must have a minimal level of trust to be able to share information, challenges, and weaknesses. Again, clearly articulated and common needs can serve as a catalyst for establishing a trusting relationship among members. Over time, cooperative members must make concerted efforts to attend to and continually build trusting relationships, because without them, members' commitment and the perceived value of the cooperative can diminish.

Geographic proximity among charter school members is equally important in starting up and sustaining the cooperative. Being in close proximity can facilitate the ability of charter school members to meet regularly and can make it easier to provide direct services to member schools and their students. The way in which close geographic proximity is defined, however, may differ depending on the size of the region and the number of charter schools in the region. For example, in one of the urban area cooperatives, many of the schools were within approximately 20 miles of one another, but in another more suburban area, the schools were much farther apart.

Adequate and sustainable funding contributes to the ease with which charter schools are able to start and sustain a cooperative. In at least six of the participating cooperatives, funds for start-up were secured from foundations, state grants, or other funding sources. Increasing the sources for funding a cooperative start-up may encourage more cooperatives; the availability of start-up funding was identified as significant contributor to the development in six of the eight cooperatives in the study. After start-up, in most cases these funds were replaced by other funding sources (e.g., membership dues, foundation funding). Establishing expectations for ongoing support of the cooperative will set members' expectations and allow the cooperative to be sustained.

Types of cooperatives

Many types of cooperatives exist, and consideration should be given to the goals and expectations of a cooperative prior to start-up. Careful consideration of the expectations in terms of membership qualifications, benefits, infrastructure, and funding sources will enable potential cooperative members to make decisions about what they need to start and sustain a cooperative. For example, if the goal is to create a venue to share practices and challenges in a professional learning community setting, the low-intensity model may adequately serve members. But, if a set of charter schools is interested in securing direct services for students and benefiting from economies of scale, the high-intensity cooperative may best align with these needs. Exhibit 6 provides a set of key questions for guiding charter schools that are considering the cooperative model to help them determine the type of model they need.

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Exhibit 6: Key Questions for Charter Schools Considering the Cooperative Model

	Key Questions for Consideration
Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who will join the cooperative? • What qualifications will members need to become members? • Will members pay dues? • Will members share costs? • Will there be a member contract? • Will members need to provide any documentation (e.g., financial)? • Do members need to be LEAs? • What rules will members need to follow? For example, will members need to maintain a level of participation?
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will the cooperative provide members with professional development? • What type of professional development will be offered (e.g., legal, best practices)? • How will members communicate (e.g., meetings, newsletters, listservs)? • Will the cooperative offer direct services to member school staff (e.g., IEP support)? • If yes, what type of direct services will be offered? • Will the cooperative identify or broker service providers? • Will the cooperative hire service providers to provide direct services to students in member schools? • Are there other benefits the cooperative will offer?
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who will run the operations of the cooperatives? Members? Executive directors? Other? • Will the cooperative hire staff (e.g., executive director, administrative assistant)? • Will the cooperative hire specialists (e.g., occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech therapist)? • If staff are hired, how will staff be managed or held accountable for their work?
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are sources of start-up funding available? • How will the cooperative be funded? Start-up? Sustained? • Will the cooperative be funded by membership dues? At what level will the membership dues be set? Will there be differences in dues based on the size of the schools? • Will members share costs? • How will the cooperative use special education funding? • Will the cooperative need additional funding sources (e.g., grants, foundations)? If yes, how will the cooperative identify and pursue this funding (e.g., members, executive director)?

Additionally, it may be helpful to think of the types on a continuum from low to high, in which a cooperative may start as a low-intensity cooperative, but may develop into a medium-intensity cooperative over time. Many of the cooperative leaders and members indicated they were considering adding benefits in the future. For example, one medium-intensity cooperative leader

mentioned that cooperative members were considering hiring staff to provide direct services to students.

Clearly, the essential factors and types of cooperatives have many interrelated characteristics. By taking into account both the essential factors and cooperative types, charter schools considering a cooperative model will be able to explore whether a cooperative model fits their needs and, if it does serve their purpose, plan for how they will start and sustain the cooperative.

Future research

From this research, it is clear that charter schools need mechanisms to help them serve students with disabilities more effectively. Charter school cooperatives offer an approach for providing this critical support to charter schools. However, as discussed in the background section, the cooperative is only one model available to charter school operators. And, as presented in the findings, some important essential factors (bottom-up approach, sustainable funding, geographic proximity) are related to the potential success of a cooperative model. It is likely that these essential factors exist in other special education support models, and further research on these models and the factors that contribute to their success is worth pursuing to help charter schools determine which model may best serve their needs.

Finally, while many charter schools struggle to serve students with disabilities, the charter school community is not without success stories. In light of this, it may be valuable to identify successful charter schools and examine how these schools are addressing and meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Indeed, they may be using a cooperative or other model, or they may have developed some other less formalized strategies. Identifying these charter schools and strategies could serve to support a broader discussion of how charter schools can ensure that they are serving students with disabilities well.

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Appendix A

- Charter School Special Education Cooperative Summaries

Charter School Special Education Cooperative Summaries

Austin (High – Medium Intensity)

The Austin Area Special Education Cooperative was started in 2000. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) provided seed money to start the cooperative, but after three years the cooperative had to sustain funding without state assistance. The cooperative's membership includes seven charter schools in the greater Austin area, serving students with a wide range of disabilities. The major purpose of the cooperative is to allow the member schools to share access to services, including a speech therapist, occupational therapist, and an LSSP for evaluation services all employed by the cooperative. Member schools sign a shared service agreement at the beginning of each school year, and they share the costs of the cooperative. Representatives from each member school are also required to attend monthly Board Meetings as part of the shared leadership structure. The cooperative receives some support from its Regional Service Center, such as access to trainings and information. Originally, the cooperative had an experienced central leader who acted as cooperative (executive) director,; however, after the cooperative had been well established (approximately four years), the member schools decided to change the leadership structure and use the cooperative funds for other purposes. Member schools now use a shared leadership structure, with one of the schools in the cooperative providing the bulk of administrative support to the cooperative.

Brooklyn Special Education Cooperative (Low Intensity)

The Brooklyn Special Education Cooperative began as part of a larger New York City Special Education Cooperative in 2005. In the past few years it became its own cooperative because the close geographic proximity of schools in Brooklyn made it easier for these schools to meet regularly. The cooperative's focus is on supporting new charter schools as they serve students with disabilities and sharing practices. To this end, the cooperative provides professional development, standard documents (e.g., 504 documents), and training modules. In addition to these services, members meet monthly to discuss challenges and share practices. There are approximately 31 member schools. Each member is required to pay member dues (\$200/year). The cooperative is staffed by officer-members who are elected. All of the New York City charter schools are part of the traditional district for special education services, and thus are not able to be their own LEA.

Bronx Special Education Cooperative (Low Intensity)

The Bronx Special Education Cooperative began as part of a larger New York City Special Education Cooperative in 2005. Because the close geographic proximity of schools in the Bronx allowed schools to meet regularly, the group of schools established its own cooperative in the past few years. The cooperative provides support in the form of professional development, technical assistance and sharing of practices among member schools. The cooperative is particularly focused on making connections with existing special education infrastructures including state and district resources to support the needs of member schools. Member schools are required to pay member dues (\$200/year). The cooperative is staffed by officer-members who are elected. All of the New York City charter schools are part of the traditional district for

special education services, and thus are not able to be their own LEA. For this reason, the district is represented among the officers of the cooperative. These officers share the responsibility for leading and facilitating the cooperative without a stipend.

Virtual (Indiana) Special Education Cooperative (High Intensity)

The Virtual Special Education Cooperative, which is no longer in existence, began in 2005 and was started in response to a state law requiring all charter school to have a special education director on the school's staff. Because this requirement placed a great burden on charter schools, one of the charter school authorizers began the Virtual Special Education Cooperative so that licensed special education teachers, paid by the cooperative, could "coordinate" or oversee and mentor special education practices and services provided to students in the charter schools. The cooperative was discontinued because the member schools indicated that they were not seeing adequate results in the schools for the amount of funding they had to give to participate. The main challenge for this cooperative was that the member schools were not in close proximity to one another, and the cooperative-provided licensed teachers were unable to adequately meet the needs of member schools.

Manhattan Special Education Cooperative (Low Intensity)

The Manhattan Special Education Cooperative began as part of a larger New York City Special Education Cooperative in 2005, and in the past few years became its own cooperative because the close geographic proximity of schools in Manhattan made it easier for these schools to meet regularly. Member schools are required to pay member dues (\$200/year). There are presently between 15 and 20 members. The cooperative is staffed by officer-members who are elected. All of the New York City charter schools are part of the traditional district for special education services, and thus are not able to be their own LEA. For this reason, the district is represented among the officers of the cooperative; however, the Manhattan Cooperative currently does not have a district representative. The officers share the responsibility for leading and facilitating the cooperative without a stipend. The cooperative recently has been going through some changes in leadership, and the focus has shifted to identifying member needs and developing strategies to support those needs through informal sharing sessions during the regular meetings. Beyond the community of practice format, the cooperative participates in New York City-wide special education training for charter school members (run by the Brooklyn Cooperative) and shares information about training opportunities.

New Orleans Special Education Cooperative (Medium Intensity)

The New Orleans Special Education Cooperative officially began in 2010. There are 29 members and most members are located within the New Orleans city limits, with a few schools that are up to four hours away from the city. The cooperative is funded by member dues and private funding sources. To become a member, charter schools must pay dues and sign a memorandum of understanding that details the vision of the special education cooperative. Members receive with professional development and technical assistance focused on serving students with disabilities. Legal guidance as well as best practices are shared through the collaborative. One-

CHARTER SCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION COOPERATIVES
A model for supporting the delivery of services to students with disabilities in charter schools

on-one technical assistance is available to members, and there is a hotline that members can call for support and assistance as needed. The cooperative staff helps to identify service providers for members, as determined by the needs of students within the member-schools. In early 2011, the cooperative plans to hire a full-time executive director.

Shasta County Special Education Cooperative (High Intensity)

The Shasta County Charter School Special Education Consortium was started in 2000 when a K-8 school chartered by a high school district needed support in providing special education services. The cooperative was supported in its start-up by the Special Education Local Planning Agency (SELPA), and this organization continues to provide some support for the cooperative's activities. The cooperative infrastructure consists of a director and fiscal agent and several direct service providers. Member schools share costs of the cooperative and to become members, a charter school must become its own LEA and then apply for membership. Potential members are required to undergo a financial review and then must sign a contractual agreement to share costs with members. The cooperative provides high quality direct services to students in member schools, such as a school psychologist, paraprofessional, and a speech and language therapist. Member schools also receive support for mediation or other legal actions in which they are involved. Schools and service providers receive professional development at several points through the year. Local charter schools that are not members of the cooperative may receive some fee-for-service benefits on a limited basis as resources allow.

Washington, DC Special Education Cooperative (Medium Intensity)

The DC Special Education Cooperative began in 1999 as a collaboration between school leaders of approximately 13 charters and a, now-defunct, charter school resource center that served DC area charter schools. The purpose of the cooperative was to bring expertise on special education to charter schools. The cooperative was originally supported by state and Federal grant programs, but is now funded by member dues. The cooperative currently has 25 member charter schools, all located within DC. Each school elects a representative to serve on the cooperative's Board, who attends approximately three meetings annually for the cooperative. In addition, members must attend a monthly membership meeting. Originally, the cooperative served to provide shared services to member organizations, but its focus has since shifted to providing technical assistance, program support and advice, and advocacy. Additional services, such as Medicaid billing, are available to members on a fee-for-service basis.

Appendix B

- Charter School Cooperatives Interview Protocol for Key Informants, Founders, and/or Executive Directors
- Charter School Cooperatives Interview Protocol for Charter School Members/Officers

Charter School Cooperatives Interview Protocol for Key Informants, Founders, and/or Executive Directors

Introduction

Thanks again for taking the time to speak with me this morning/afternoon. As I'm sure you know, you have been selected to be interviewed from a sample of 24 individuals who are involved with special education cooperatives in charter schools.

Before we start, I'd like to provide a little background on our work, and answer any questions you might have for me. I am from the American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent not-for-profit applied research organization, and am part of a team that is working on a project for the National Charter School Resource Center (funded by the U.S. Department of Education). We have been asked to identify and interview individuals from charter school communities who are currently leading and/or participating in a special education cooperative to effectively serve students with disabilities in charter schools. The focus of the study is to learn more about efforts to establish and further develop these cooperatives, with the intent to share this knowledge with other charter school communities that are struggling in being able to provide necessary and quality services to students with disabilities.

Results of the Study

Our findings will result in a final report as well as a "master class" or technical assistance workshop to support other charter school leaders who are interested in developing a special education cooperative. The final report will be distributed to charter school communities through the National Charter School Resource Center's website. The master class will be delivered as a pre-conference workshop at the National Charter School Conference in June 2011 and will also be posted as a webinar on the National Charter School Resource Center's website.

Confidentiality

I want to assure you that all information obtained today will be kept confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, or your organization's name, and will not attribute any quotes. We also will not share what you and I discuss with other people in this district.

In the final report, we anticipate that we will acknowledge and thank the special education cooperatives from which we gathered information. Would you be comfortable if we acknowledged your organization by name? Again, your organization will not be attributable or attached to any quotes used in the report.

Consent

You should have received an email prior to this call including basic information about this study, as well as some of the issues I've just mentioned with regard to anonymity and confidentiality. Did you get a chance to review this information? As indicated on this summary, by participating

in this phone call today, you have indicated your consent to participate. However, you may request to stop the interview at any point.

Ok, do you have any questions for me before we get started?

Recording

If you don't mind, I would like to record this interview simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our research team will hear the recording; it is only for my own reference to improve the accuracy of my notes. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. Would that be OK?

[Begin Recording]

General Information

1. Can you please describe the special education cooperative that you are involved with?
2. What is your role in the cooperative?
3. Approximately how many students with disabilities are served by the cooperative ? Does the cooperative serve students with a wide range of disability types and needs (probe: mild, severe, emotional)?
4. Do you know how long has this cooperative been in existence?

Start-Up

5. Do you know how the cooperative began?
6. What were the reason/incentives to starting up a cooperative? Need? Financial? Other?
7. Was there any kind of preparatory work done prior to establishing the coop (e.g., feasibility study, needs assessment among schools)?
8. Who was involved in the start-up? What schools/districts? Other organizations (e.g., SEA, state charter school association, etc.)?
9. How long did it take to start the cooperative? Months, years, etc.?
10. Were there staff dedicated to the start-up? Were they school/district based? Outside consultant(s)? From somewhere else?
11. Were there barriers to start-up? If yes, what were they?
12. Did the cooperative have an initial focus?
13. Since starting up, has the work of the cooperative changed? How? Has it expanded, or become more focused?
14. What kind of funding has helped to start the coop, and what kind of funding currently sustains the coop? (probe: membership dues, foundation funds, grants, state or district funding?)

Membership

15. How many schools (and/or districts) are members of the cooperative? What are the schools that make up the cooperative's membership? Are they all charter schools or are

they a mix of charter and district schools? If there are districts involved, approximately how many schools are in these districts?

16. How do schools become members of the cooperative (or how do they apply, if it is an application process)? Is membership voluntary?
17. What are the requirements for membership in the cooperative (Probes: initiation or annual fees (what are the fees), agreement to a responsibility statement or MOU, commitment to certain logistical requirements, recognition as an LEA by the State)?
18. Have there been any changes to the cooperative's membership over time? Are there any anticipated changes in the future?

Cooperative Leadership and Staffing

19. Who currently serves in leadership or coordinator role(s) for the cooperative? Is this responsibility shared by members or is it a funded position or something else?
20. What are the responsibilities of cooperative leadership/coordinator?
21. How was this leadership/coordinator selected?
22. Besides a leader or coordinator, are there other cooperative staff? How many staff? What are their roles?

Membership Benefits

23. What are the services offered to cooperative members? Probe if not mentioned for activities related to:
 - a. Cost and funds sharing?
 - b. Navigating state and federal policy requirements related to students with disabilities?
 - c. Strategic decision making regarding service delivery?
 - d. Access to information and resources on special education (via a website, perhaps)?
 - e. Assistance with strategies for communicating with families?
 - f. Access to a shared special education or other type (i.e., speech and language, behavioral) of specialist?
 - g. Provision of special services or technologies to meet the needs of students with disabilities?
 - h. Are there any other services that I have not mentioned?
24. How do members access cooperative services and benefits? (Probe: fee for service, web-based services, regular meetings across members, regular communication with cooperative leadership)
25. How often do representatives from each cooperative member meet?
26. What is the process for decision making among cooperative partners (Example: weighted votes)?

27. Does the cooperative meet other needs for member charter schools beyond special education? If yes, what are they?

Impact

28. What feedback have you received from member schools about the cooperative? How do you obtain feedback? Have you gained or lost members in the past X years?
29. Have you collected any data on the impact of the cooperative (in terms of school activities or, if available, student outcomes)? If yes, what do those data indicate? If no, do you have plans to collect data in the future?
30. What positive impacts have you observed or heard about for schools since the implementation of the cooperative? (Note: this may or may not be based on hard data, depending on the response to the previous question)
31. What challenges have been encountered? How are you addressing these issues moving forward?

Conclusion

32. How would you assess the overall impact of the cooperative?
33. If you were advising other charter schools on getting involved with or creating a similar cooperative, what do you think they need to know? (probe: Do you know of any other communities who are now in the process of trying to establish a similar coop?)
34. What do you think are the biggest barriers to developing a charter school cooperative?
35. Are there resources or tools that may help individuals to overcome these barriers?
36. Is there anything that I have not asked, that you think is important to know about the cooperative?
37. Is there anyone else I should contact to discuss the cooperative? If yes, who? Contact information?

That is my last question. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the study or if you have any further information that you would like to share. I may be reached at **PHONE** or **EMAIL**. **Thank you for your time.**

Charter School Cooperatives Interview Protocol for Charter School Members/Officers

Introduction

Thanks again for taking the time to speak with me this morning/afternoon. As I'm sure you know, you have been selected to be interviewed from a sample of 24 individuals who are involved with special education cooperatives in charter schools.

Before we start, I'd like to provide a little background on our work, and answer any questions you might have for me. I am from the American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent not-for-profit applied research organization, and am part of a team that is working on a project for the National Charter School Resource Center (funded by the U.S. Department of Education). We have been asked to identify and interview individuals from charter school communities who are currently leading and/or participating in a special education cooperative to effectively serve students with disabilities in charter schools. The focus of the study is to learn more about efforts to establish and further develop these cooperatives, with the intent to share this knowledge with other charter school communities that are struggling in being able to provide necessary and quality services to students with disabilities.

Results of the Study

Our findings will result in a final report as well as a "master class" or technical assistance workshop to support other charter school leaders who are interested in developing a special education cooperative. The final report will be distributed to charter school communities through the National Charter School Resource Center's website. The master class will be delivered as a pre-conference workshop at the National Charter School Conference in June 2011 and will also be posted as a webinar on the National Charter School Resource Center's website.

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In the final report, we anticipate that we will acknowledge and thank the special education cooperatives from which we gathered information. Would you be comfortable if we acknowledged your organization by name? Again, your organization will not be attributable or attached to any quotes used in the report.

Consent

You should have received an email prior to this call including basic information about this study, as well as some of the issues I've just mentioned with regard to anonymity and confidentiality. Did you get a chance to review this information? As indicated on this summary, by participating

in this phone call today, you have indicated your consent to participate. However, you may request to stop the interview at any point.

Ok, do you have any questions for me before we get started?

Recording

If you don't mind, I would like to record this interview simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our research team will hear the recording; it is only for my own reference to improve the accuracy of my notes. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. Would that be OK?

[Begin Recording]

General Information

1. Can you please describe the special education cooperative that you are involved with?
2. What is your role in the cooperative?
3. How long have you been involved with this cooperative?
4. Approximately how many students with disabilities are in your school? Can you describe the range of disability types and needs (probe: mild, severe, emotional)?

Start-Up

5. Do you know how the cooperative began? Were you involved at all in the start-up?

ASK FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IF SCHOOL REP WAS INVOLVED:

6. What were the reason/incentives to starting up a cooperative? Need? Financial? Other?
7. Was there any kind of preparatory work done prior to establishing the coop (e.g., feasibility study, needs assessment among schools)?
8. Who was involved in the start-up? What schools/districts? Other organizations (e.g., SEA, state charter school association, etc.)?
9. How long did it take to start the cooperative? Months, years, etc.?
10. Were there staff dedicated to the start-up? Were they school/district based? Outside consultant(s)? From somewhere else?
11. Were there barriers to start-up? If yes, what were they?
12. Did the cooperative have an initial focus?
13. Since starting up, has the work of the cooperative changed? How? Has it expanded, or become more focused?
14. What kind of funding has helped to start the coop, and what kind of funding currently sustains the coop? (probe: membership dues, foundation funds, grants, state or district funding?)

Membership

15. How did your school become a members of the cooperative (e.g., did you apply, if it is an application process)? Is membership voluntary?
16. Why did you want to join the cooperative?
17. What are the requirements for membership in the cooperative (Probes: initiation or annual fees (what are the fees), agreement to a responsibility statement or MOU, commitment to certain logistical requirements, recognition as an LEA by the State)?
18. Have there been any changes to the cooperative's membership over time? Are there any anticipated changes in the future?

Cooperative Leadership and Staffing

19. Who currently serves in leadership or coordinator role(s) for the cooperative? Is this responsibility shared by members or is it a funded position or something else?
20. How do you interact with the leadership staff of the cooperative?

Membership Benefits

21. What are the services offered to cooperative members? Probe if not mentioned for activities related to:
 - i. Cost and funds sharing?
 - j. Navigating state and federal policy requirements related to students with disabilities?
 - k. Strategic decision making regarding service delivery?
 - l. Access to information and resources on special education (via a website, perhaps)?
 - m. Assistance with strategies for communicating with families?
 - n. Access to a shared special education or other type (i.e., speech and language, behavioral) of specialist?
 - o. Provision of special services or technologies to meet the needs of students with disabilities?
 - p. Are there any other services that I have not mentioned?
22. How do members access cooperative services and benefits? (Probe: fee for service, web-based services, regular meetings across members, regular communication with cooperative leadership)
23. How often do representatives from each cooperative member meet?
24. What is the process for decision making among cooperative partners (Example: weighted votes)?
25. Does the cooperative meet other needs for member charter schools beyond special education? If yes, what are they?

Impact

26. What has been the biggest benefit to your school of cooperative membership?
27. What challenges have been encountered in being part of this cooperative? How are you addressing these issues moving forward?
28. What, if anything, do you wish was different about how this cooperative is run/the kinds of services it provides?

Conclusion

29. If you were advising other charter schools on getting involved with or creating a similar cooperative, what do you think they need to know? (probe: Do you know of any other communities who are now in the process of trying to establish a similar coop?)
30. What do you think are the biggest barriers to developing a charter school cooperative?
31. Are there resources or tools that may help individuals to overcome these barriers?
32. Is there anything that I have not asked, that you think is important to know about the cooperative?
33. Is there anyone else I should contact to discuss the cooperative? If yes, who? Contact information?

That is my last question. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the study or if you have any further information that you would like to share. I may be reached at **PHONE** or **EMAIL**. **Thank you for your time.**