

Encouraging Districts and Charters to Link Arms to Solve Problems

Charter schools and school districts have been at odds since the first charter school law passed in 1991. Districts resent the competition and subsequent funding loss for traditional schools. Charters resent the lack of access to facilities and other resources and attempts to infringe on their autonomy. This bifurcated approach to public schooling carries high costs for charters, districts, and—most importantly—for students and their families.

Yet a fast-growing number of school districts and charters are working together to resolve challenges and reduce costs. States, which have largely sat on the sidelines of these conflicts, have the opportunity—perhaps the obligation—to do more. In particular, state boards of education can leverage local cross-sector collaboration opportunities through policymaking, the bully pulpit, and a strengthening of charter authorizing. As part of their efforts to support and improve low-performing schools under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), they should want to do so.

Detroit is a painful example of what can happen in the absence of coordination and collaboration. In the city's public schools, half of which are charter, competition for students is fierce. Yet many schools in both sectors are low performing or failing.¹ Schools focus more on the competition for students than on the quality of teaching and learning. As a result, parents face many choices but few quality options. And families struggle to navigate enrollment, transportation, and special education in the absence of systems that make these areas clear, coordinated, and transparent.

Even in more highly functioning “high choice” cities, failure to coordinate

across charter and district lines creates missed opportunities, inefficiencies, and inequities:

- Fewer students benefit from effective instructional practices when they are not shared.
- Charter schools cannot access equitable funding, economies of scale, or expertise to support students with special needs.
- Inconsistent approaches to school discipline result in inequitable treatment of students, and the district can become the option of last resort.
- Families—especially low-income and those with less formal education—can have trouble accessing high-quality options in the absence of coordinated enrollment, transportation, and information systems.

Backed by Cleveland's mayor and the district CEO, the Cleveland Plan for Transforming Schools set a goal of ensuring every child attends a high-quality school, whether district-run or charter, and formalized the district's strategy to give schools greater autonomy and accountability. Voters subsequently approved a four-year operating levy that earmarked \$77 million a year for the district and \$5.5 million a year for charters that partnered with the district.

Collaboration efforts in places like Cleveland are not feel-good exercises. They are a grown-up response to the urgent need to create more great schools and close achievement gaps—something no sector, organization, or agency can do alone.

As part of its work monitoring and studying collaboration efforts over the last five years, the Center for Reinventing Public Education (CPRE) has talked

State boards that encourage district-charter collaboration can advance solutions to turn around low-performing district schools and increase charter quality.

by Robin J. Lake

Box 1. Collaboration Takes Many Forms

- In its SKY Partnership with KIPP and YES Prep charter organizations, Houston's Spring Branch Independent School District co-located the charter schools within three struggling district schools. The arrangement exposed the district schools to the charter schools' college-prep culture, extended the charter schools' impact, and gave their students on the co-located campus access to district electives and extracurricular activities. District leaders also provide equitable per-pupil funding for YES Prep and KIPP charter school students. As part of the funding model, the district provides YES Prep and KIPP with food, transportation, facilities, technology, and maintenance services. District and charter leaders still must negotiate unanticipated costs.
- In Hartford, Connecticut, district leaders tapped a high-performing charter school operator to help prepare promising candidates to fill principal posts in district schools. Achievement First's Residency Program for School Leadership trains dozens of new administrators across three districts.
- In Boston, educators in district, charter, and Catholic schools received a three-year sequence of professional development to improve instruction for underserved students, including English learners, special education students, and black and Latino males. Local schools with strong academic results among male students of color also received grants to share instructional practices across sectors.
- In Central Falls, Rhode Island, district and charter schools share efforts to improve instruction in struggling schools, including teacher professional development around math, reading, bilingual and special education, and the use of restorative justice to reduce exclusionary discipline. In addition, the district superintendent and a local charter school worked together to find a closed Catholic school building that was then renovated and opened in 2014 as a new charter elementary school.

with leaders in more than 50 districts who are engaging with their local charter sector. Active collaboration efforts are under way in big cities with large numbers of charter schools, such as Denver, Boston, Indianapolis, and Cleveland, as well as in small, rural, and suburban districts like Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Spring Branch, Texas. In the largest-scale formal collaboration effort yet, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation initiative, launched in 2010, supported District-Charter Collaboration Compacts signed by district and charter leaders in 21 cities.

This work is politically and technically difficult. And in many places, resistance to partnerships remains steadfast. Yet there is enough of a record to establish what characterizes successful collaborations and how state boards can help.

Innovation, Transparency, and Equity

Charter schools' autonomy allows them to experiment and innovate. Many charter schools see themselves as laboratories from which school districts can learn. Districts have collaborated with charters on leadership training methods, instructional strategies, professional development, and co-location of charter and district schools (see box 1). In addition, districts often partner with high-performing charters to improve or replace chronically low-performing schools. Charters often partner with districts to access specialized expertise, facilities, or to realize economies of scale.

District and charter leaders commonly collaborate to make it easier—and more equitable—for families to navigate an array of public school choices. In Denver, Washington, DC, and New Orleans, most or all public schools—district and charter—participate in “unified enrollment systems” that include standardized forms, timelines, and a centralized lottery and assignment process. The OneApp unified system covers some 89 percent of public schools in New Orleans, as well as 29 private schools in the Louisiana Scholarship Program and early childhood programs, including private schools and childcare centers receiving public funding. In Washington, DC, and Denver, common enrollment systems have led to greater transparency around admissions, better school information, and a more manageable and fairer enrollment process.²

Enrollment can skew in undesirable ways if not well planned and monitored. For complex reasons, special education students or English learners may not attend

Box 2. Collaborating on Special Education

- In Denver, a push to replicate district-run special education center programs within the charter sector has nearly eliminated an imbalance between the share of special education students served in district versus charter schools. District and charter leaders traveled the country together to research special education service delivery models, resulting in the creation of two district and two charter schools with high percentages of students with a disability and high rates of classroom-level inclusion.
- In 2014, New Orleans' state-run Recovery School District (RSD) tried to address the fiscal challenges around serving special education students by aligning special education dollars with the level of service a student needs, sharing catastrophic costs across schools, and incentivizing high-performing schools to expand their special education offerings. A charter-run fellowship program provides professional development to special education coordinators citywide. The RSD and New Orleans schools also created a centralized expulsion system to make final determinations on student expulsions fairer.
- In the Franklin-McKinley School District in San Jose, California, Compact leaders realized charter schools were serving fewer students with special needs than the district. They worked to increase families' awareness that charter schools offer special education services through efforts like an enrollment fair for families in one of San Jose's most under-resourced neighborhoods. Districtwide expansion of this fair is now being contemplated. And charter and district school leaders have jointly visited Los Angeles schools with successful inclusive education models.

charters schools at similar rates.³ Varying charter and district policies on discipline and mid-year entry complicate the picture on which students schools wind up serving, and these policies can color policy debates around academic accountability.⁴ Many cities have collaborated to address these thorny issues and have wrought some important successes (box 2).⁵

Collaboration has also improved relationships, programs, and bottom lines, according to a 2015 Thomas B. Fordham Institute report. In Boston, Denver, and Washington, DC, interviewees from both sectors said they speak more regularly, trust each other more, and feel like they can reach out to someone in the other sector if the need arises. In Boston, the district reduced its annual busing costs by \$2 million by coordinating school start and end times with charters; some charter leaders report that transportation services improved in the process.⁶

Making Collaboration Work

Despite the many potential positive outcomes, collaboration is not always possible or productive. Efforts can easily stall due to leadership changes, lack of deep commitment to ongoing

problem solving, and political pressures. But it is important for districts, charters, and families to try to get past these barriers for students' sake: CPRE research shows this is possible if district and charter leaders can do the following:

- avoid treating collaboration as a side project or a one-way street with one party dominating;
- map clear, shared objectives (like expanding high-quality seats and equity);
- identify leaders in both sectors who can focus on making common cause and not on differences;
- include provisions for accountability on collaboration progress;
- recognize and accommodate diverse charter, community, and district interests;
- elicit commitment from more than just a handful of leaders;
- benefit from "boundary spanner" leaders who bridge district and charter cultures; and
- tackle issues that can produce early, tangible wins and build from there.

State boards needn't be in the forced marriage business, but they can help set the tone and start or advance the collaboration conversation in their state.

A 2016 Mathematica evaluation of the seven district-charter partnerships that the Gates Foundation selected in 2012 for intensive investment pointed to similar strategies.⁷ Researchers asked central office and school leaders from both sectors in those partnerships for ideas to improve future collaboration, and they suggested the following:

- commit to the long haul;
- involve more than just a small minority of schools or school staff to boost the supply of innovative ideas;
- create transparency about school effectiveness across schools in both sectors so schools can see how they are doing relative to others in the city;
- invest in implementation support for shared best practices (like coaches or school leader oversight) to avoid getting diminishing returns for collaboration; and
- promote successes by identifying, publicizing, and investing in successful forms of collaboration.

Effective district-charter collaboration is a careful balancing act and a fragile endeavor in an often highly politicized environment. Years of animosity and distrust cannot easily shift to a productive partnership. Leaders from both sectors are wise to spend time establishing ground rules and identifying clear objectives and efficient processes to maintain momentum and build on small wins. While the word collaboration implies friendly cooperation, efforts to bring formerly warring education parties to the table are often laden with political landmines. Determined and artful leadership is required. State boards have an important role to play in making that possible.

How State Boards Can Help

Experience to date tells us that effective district-charter collaboration is more likely to grow out of a long-term, voluntary commitment from both sectors. State boards needn't be in the forced marriage business, but they can help set the tone and start or advance the collaboration conversation in their state. Depending on the authorities and roles in a given state, state

boards can provide policy guidance, give political support as education leaders with a bully pulpit, and strengthen charter authorizing.

Policymaking. ESSA hands states new opportunities to use federal funds creatively to support collaboration. Under ESSA, states can prioritize start-up grants for schools that are part of collaborative efforts, dissemination grants to focus on replicating solutions to common collaboration challenges such as unified enrollment or facilities sharing, and resources to help the best charter schools and the most successful district-charter collaborators share their practices more broadly. Using these new flexibilities, states could create funding set-asides for districts and charters that partner to turn around the lowest-performing district schools.

States like Florida have used the power of the purse to foster collaboration, awarding competitive district-charter collaboration grants. Adam Emerson, the Florida education department's charter school director, explains why the state stepped in to promote district-charter collaboration:

Our State Board of Education has made it clear that it wants our charter school sector to become one that is more focused on lifting the state's lowest achieving and educationally disadvantaged students. But we hadn't, until now, focused on getting charters and districts to work together to tackle our greatest needs. Charter schools and school districts need to collaborate to surmount the challenges facing our lowest-achieving neighborhoods. But we didn't launch the Florida District-Charter Collaborative Compact to foster collaboration for its own sake. We wanted to effect system-wide change by harnessing the best of both sectors.

Skepticism about whether charter schools in a community are truly open to all or are avoiding serving (or underserving) the costliest students can fuel opposition to collaboration; taking the funding issue off the table can help. To that end, states can revise funding formulas to ensure they more accurately reflect the needs of the students each school serves. For example, state

special education finance mechanisms could be adjusted to better align funding to student need or to create emergency risk pools, as Louisiana recently did. On the federal front, ESSA encourages states to channel Charter School Program (CSP) spending toward improving charter school access for students with disabilities and who are English learners.

State boards can also set the stage by focusing on accountability and equity:

- Include charter school performance scores in district accountability ratings. Districts are more inclined to partner with strong charter schools if the partnerships “count” toward district ratings in the state accountability system.
- Encourage localities to adopt common performance metrics. Such metrics create more transparency, making it easier for charters and districts to work together to address performance and equity problems so the state need not step in.
- Target collaboration efforts on issues important to families, such as common discipline and enrollment systems across the district and charter sectors to boost transparency and simplify the system to promote fair and equal access. Such efforts can put educators and local leaders on a path to further collaboration as they increasingly see their public education landscape as a “system of schools” rather than two sets of schools on opposite sides of a divide.

Some districts resist collaboration because they believe charter schools enjoy unfair advantages around autonomy and flexibility. They ask: If something is good for charters, why isn't it good for all public schools? State boards who wish to provide all their state's public schools such advantages can work toward making that a reality by creating innovation zones that give select district schools more autonomy.

Manning the Bully Pulpit. State school boards can use their bully pulpit to encourage collaboration and highlight collaboration successes. They can boost trust across the sectors by building connections, both informally and formally. State boards can convene groups for specific challenges, such as blue

ribbon commissions and study groups that bring together people who might not otherwise work together. They can help build coalitions to support collaboration, such as recruiting a mayor or a business coalition to get involved. Broadening the tent can also help insulate collaborative efforts from the common plague of local leadership turnover.

Strengthening Local or State Authorizing. District leaders who believe area charters are low quality or run by shady operators have little incentive to collaborate. Improving authorizing can increase the quality of charter schools. As Florida's Emerson says: “Strong authorizing is essential to create the conditions for collaboration.” Florida has worked to boost local authorizer capacity by developing voluntary statewide authorizing standards with districts and charter operators and by awarding grants to districts that want to strengthen their authorizing practices.⁸ And Florida has tried to manage charter school supply—and avoid having some neighborhoods be quality school deserts—by crafting incentives in their federal Charter Schools Program grant for charter operators to open schools in high-need areas.

State boards should ensure that state and local authorizers apply clear performance expectations, performance contracts, and predictable renewal procedures based on performance. States can use or connect local authorizers with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers' standards and policies that support merit-based authorizing. State boards that have authorizing authority themselves can prioritize charter applicants' commitment to collaboration in their charter approval, appeals, and renewal criteria.

Collaboration Helps State Boards

CPRE's research shows that collaboration is a necessity, not a nicety. Struggling districts that operate in isolation risk a downward spiral of lackluster results and declining student enrollment. Collaboration with high-performing charter schools can be part of an effective strategy to help districts turn around chronically low-performing schools and increase enrollment. For charters, collaboration offers the chance to access specialized district expertise,

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economies of scale, and resources like facilities, enabling them to help more students than they could by simply opening more schools.

Without leadership, however, local collaboration efforts will get mired down. States must enter the fray—not just because it's nicer to get along. States can pull the available levers to promote district-charter collaboration because it can help them meet their goals of greater equity and public school improvement. States can help districts and charters leverage what they learn from one another and better coordinate the benefits to all students—regardless of what kind of public school they attend.

The costs of *not* collaborating fall squarely on students and families. Critically, district-charter collaboration can help states achieve key goals, like developing effective, evidence-based support and intervention strategies for struggling schools, as called for in ESSA.

Bottom line: State boards of education can lead on school improvement and equity by leading on support for district-charter collaboration. States that leave matters to chance risk leaving many students and their families behind, and they squander opportunities to meet the goals they set. ■

¹Robin J. Lake et al., “Fixing Detroit’s Broken School System,” *Education Next* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2015).

²Steven Glazer and Dallas Dotter, “Market Signals: Evidence of the Determinants and Consequences of School Choice from a Citywide Lottery” (Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2016); Douglas Harris et al., “The New Orleans OneApp,” *Education Next* 15, no. 4 (Fall 2015).

³Marcus A. Winters, “Why the Gap? Special Education and New York Charter Schools” (Seattle and New York: Center for Reinventing Public Education and Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2013).

⁴Patrick Denice et al., “Understanding Student Discipline Practices in Charter Schools: A Research Agenda” (Seattle: Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2015); Betheny Gross et al., “Grappling with Discipline in Autonomous Schools: New Approaches from D.C. and New Orleans” (Seattle: Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2016).

⁵Paul Hill and Tricia Maas, “Backfill in Charter High Schools: Practices to Learn From and Questions to Be Answered” (Seattle: Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2015).

⁶Daniela Doyle et al., “Is Détente Possible? District-Charter School Relations in Four Cities” (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2015).

⁷Christina Tuttle et al., “Understanding District-Charter Collaboration Grants” (Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2016).

⁸ESSA also encourages states to use federal Charter Schools Program dollars to improve charter oversight.

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their particular state can obtain tailored suggestions from NACSA’s online toolkit.¹¹

If they take seriously their responsibility to exercise strong accountability, state boards and state education agencies must address issues of basic capacity. But just as important as ensuring there is sufficient public muscle to enforce charter accountability is making sure that collective reason and values are steering the process over time. A commitment to strong *democratic* accountability requires that tough questions about competing values be discussed and decided in public institutions, like legislatures and courts, that are open to varying perspectives, subject to freedom of information requirements, oriented toward finding common ground where it exists, and committed to openly debating and resolving conflicting values and interests where it does not. ■

¹See, e.g., Andrew Maul, “Review of Urban Charter School Study 2015,” (Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center, 2015).

²CREDO, *Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States* (Stanford, CA, 2009).

³Edward Cremata et al., *National Charter School Study 2013* (Stanford, CA: CREDO, 2013).

⁴James L. Woodworth et al., *Online Charter School Study 2015* (Stanford, CA: CREDO, 2015).

⁵On charter abuses, see, e.g., The Center for Popular Democracy and The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, “The Tip of the Iceberg: Charter School Vulnerabilities to Waste, Fraud, and Abuse” (Brooklyn, NY, and Washington, DC, 2015).

⁶For a classic treatment, see J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916). For a contemporary one, see A. Gutman, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999, rev. ed.).

⁷Molly Hensley-Clancy, “Online K-12 School Fights Attempt to Check if Students Really Show Up,” *BuzzFeed News* (September 2, 2016). A county judge rejected ECOT’s request to block the state’s department of education from collecting the attendance data. ECOT is appealing the state’s original challenge to its figures, and in mid-October the state approved half a million dollars to enable the state’s attorney general to pursue the case. Catherine Candisky, “ECOT Appeals Attendance Finding,” *Columbus Dispatch* (October 11, 2016); Alan Johnson, “State to Spend \$500,000 in Online Schools Legal Fight,” *Columbus Dispatch* (October 18, 2016).

⁸National Association of Charter School Authorizers, “Authorizing Data in Depth: Staffing,” <http://www.qualitycharters.org/research-policies/archive/soca-data-in-depth-staffing/>.

⁹Lyria Boast et al., “Authorizer Shopping: Lessons from Experience and Ideas for the Future,” NACSA Reports (Chicago: National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2016).

¹⁰The relationship was statistically significant. R. Zimmer et al., “Charter School Authorizers and Student Achievement,” *Education Finance and Policy* 9 (Winter 2014): 59–85.

¹¹National Association of Charter School Authorizers, “State Policy Analysis: Toolkit,” <http://www.qualitycharters.org/research-policies/archive/state-policy-analysis-toolkit/>.