

Bridging the District-Charter Divide to Help More Students Succeed

Executive Summary

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In cities where public charter schools serve a large share of students, the costs of ongoing sector divisions and hostility across district and charter lines fall squarely on students and families. Exercising choice and accessing good schools in “high-choice cities” can be difficult for many families, especially some of the most vulnerable, like parents of children who have special needs or are English language learners. Families often find that, despite a rise in the number of high-quality charter schools in a given city, they face:

- Inconsistent approaches to suspension or expulsion.
- Neighborhood “quality deserts” where there is no alternative to unsafe and ineffective neighborhood schools.
- Hostility between district and charter schools that prevents educators from learning from one another and improving.
- Barriers to accessing and judging all the different types of public schools in the city.

In a rising number of cities with these kinds of challenges, cooperative action between districts and charter schools is a necessity, not a nicety.

For district and charter leaders genuinely committed to meeting children’s educational needs across a city, the question isn’t whether to cooperate, but how.

While animosity among education competitors remains the norm in too many communities, a growing number of districts and charter schools are realizing that they must work together for the benefit of students and families. In at least 35 urban school districts with significant numbers of charter schools, efforts are underway to jointly improve instruction, align policies, address inequities, or find operational efficiencies. About a dozen of these districts are working even more actively with charter schools to share resources, ideas, strategies, and responsibilities. For

leaders genuinely committed to meeting children’s educational needs across a city, the question isn’t whether to cooperate, but how. This report helps explain why and offers concrete recommendations on the how.

Based on research by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), this report dives deeply to answer leaders’ critical questions about district-charter cooperation, or collaboration. What is the payback that makes it worthwhile? What are the tangible impacts and results? For charter school or district leaders considering anything from coordinated activities to shared resources and responsibilities, what types of partnerships are most effective? For state policy and philanthropic leaders, are partnerships worth supporting?

Since 2011, CRPE researchers have conducted hundreds of phone and field interviews with district, charter, and community leaders in 23 cities that have formalized their partnerships by signing District-Charter Collaboration Compacts supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In

addition, we have tracked cooperative efforts across the nation as part of our nearly decade-long work with portfolio cities, where charter schools are part of the strategy for ensuring every child in every neighborhood has access to a great school.¹

Successful collaboration can take many forms, focusing on systems to improve special education services for students or information for families, peer learning networks, co-locations of charter and district schools, shared central services, fairer funding formulas, and joint advocacy efforts. Cooperation between districts and charter schools can deliver tangible benefits, including:

FOR COMMUNITIES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More high-quality seats available for students • Higher-quality options available for English language learners and special education students • More streamlined information and systems 	
FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS	FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A partner in the work of ensuring high-quality schools in every neighborhood • Sharing burdens like talent pipeline and professional development • Access to charter innovation, professional development, and expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved access to facilities, funding, and families • Reduced political tensions • Exposure to district expertise • Increased reach and impact

These partnerships have resulted in significant policy “wins” for students and families, including:

- Replacing chronically struggling neighborhood schools with high-performing charter schools.
- Citywide common enrollment systems to address some of the burdens of choice.
- More equitable and transparent discipline practices in both sectors.
- Coordinated cost-sharing systems to provide students with special needs greater access to choice and innovative practices.
- Common accountability tools that allow families as well as district and charter administrators to track school performance across a city regardless of who governs that school.

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The successes described in this report show what is possible when competitors also become collaborators. But when we look across the formalized efforts to date, a concerning disconnect emerges between the stark need for cross-sector cooperation and what has actually been accomplished.

Lack of commitment, strategy, resources, and legal frameworks to support cooperation all contribute to the limited success. Worse, they contribute to the many cities that are backsliding on progress. It is past time for leaders to accelerate this work.

¹ The Portfolio Network includes more than 50 affiliated cities, but CRPE tracks and analyzes those that are actively carrying out the strategy (currently 35). Of the 23 cities with formal District-Charter Collaboration Compacts, 17 are also Portfolio cities.

To support districts and charter schools in this often difficult, politically divisive work, we recommend that:

- **District and charter leaders** start by focusing on how cooperation can address their most timely and pressing needs, move toward adopting a clear philosophy on cooperation's role in their city to help others understand and support it, build broad coalitions to push collaborative initiatives, develop targeted partnerships while maintaining momentum toward systemic efforts, and create clear governance structures to move the work forward.
- **State Education Agencies** consider ways to support cross-sector partnerships through financial incentives, accountability systems that put district and charter schools on an even playing field, and scalable family-friendly policies around areas like enrollment, accessible and transparent school information, and transportation to school.
- **Funders** support the work cities want to do and help them build the coalitions and support networks they need to sustain long-term, cross-sector partnerships.

Both districts and charter schools fail to engage at their own peril. Charter schools will not continue to grow apace without access to the funding or facilities districts control. Districts will not be able to use charter schools' flexibilities to their advantage and stabilize enrollment losses without substantive partnerships with charter schools. Most importantly, families and students will continue to pay the price for isolated, self-interested action. By identifying ways to level the playing field on school competition, developing common strategies to make school choice more user-friendly and fair for all families, and looking for opportunities to leverage complementary organizational assets and advantages for greater impact on students and classrooms, the sum of district-charter cooperation will indeed be greater than its sector-specific parts.