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Good Options and Choices for All Families: How Some Portfolio Districts Are Collaborating with Charter Schools

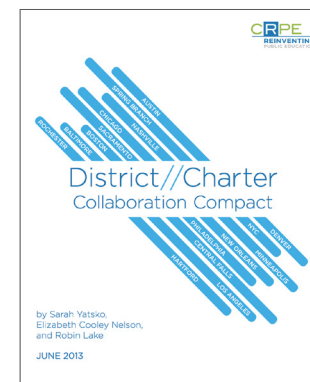
OVERVIEW

Historically, relationships between school districts and charter schools have been rocky. Charter schools, which were started in part to challenge the existing structures of district governance, sought to provide school autonomy, choice, and competition. These aims placed charter schools at odds with school districts, which often responded with opposition to charter creation, expansion, and success. In turn, charter school advocates have gone to the courts and legislatures in order to create new schools or convert existing district schools.

While animosity between school districts and charter schools still exists in many cities, many portfolio districts have taken a different tact—they are finding common ground and fostering collaboration with their charter counterparts. These districts are interested in how some charter schools have reached students the district has historically struggled to serve. For their part, charter schools are more inclined to see the district as a resource with its own expertise as well as a potential partner that can help the charter school reach more students through facilities or training opportunities. Capitalizing on this changing climate, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation initiated a conversation between a group of superintendents and charter school leaders in February 2010. This dialogue evolved into [16 cities signing “District-Charter Collaboration Compacts.”](#) The initial \$100,000 Gates grants supported the work of these district and charter leaders to implement signed Compact agreements in which they pledged to share resources, data, and ideas across what had been battle lines. This commitment to improving collaboration was emboldened in December 2012, when the Gates Foundation [awarded nearly \\$25 million](#) shared among seven of the sixteen Compact cities to further push specific collaborations.

This brief summarizes the Center on Reinventing Public Education’s (CRPE) analysis of the efforts of Compact cities to increase [district-charter collaboration](#) over the last two years.¹ Through its initiative, the Gates Foundation seeks to bridge the district-charter divide and move the focus from governance to school performance. The initiative’s intent is to create common ground between districts and charter schools around providing highly effective education options for all students.²

All of the current Compact cities have also adopted the [Portfolio Strategy](#), a continuous improvement model that opens and expands successful schools, replaces or closes long-struggling schools, and uses an annual review cycle to make performance management



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Using data and documents from interviews with district and charter leaders, this interim report details the first two years of Compact work and includes key agreements and measurements of progress for each city, plus a checklist for district and charter leaders considering a collaboration Compact.

decisions. District leaders committed to a portfolio strategy seek out strong talent and good ideas regardless of the source or provider, and believe in the importance of offering good options and choices for all families. Their openness to these ideas makes them more likely to be open to engaging with charter schools.

Full implementation of the portfolio strategy, built around [7 key components](#), allows parents to choose from a diverse array of schools; allows districts to provide schools with a higher level of autonomy over spending, staffing, and other resources; makes use of new pipelines for talent; and operates transparently while seeking the input from the broader community. The strategy holds all schools, district-run and charter, to the same high performance standards and consequences.

Though all Compact cities have begun a district-charter dialogue, and most have made some policy and practice changes since signing their compact agreements, the degree of collaboration varies across the cities.

WHAT DOES COLLABORATION LOOK LIKE?

Cities approached the task of crafting and implementing Compact agreements in a variety of ways. Some cities, like Boston, [committed to regular meetings and set up formal agreements and bylaws for participation](#), while others kept meetings informal and irregularly scheduled. When politics were raw, some cities shied away from controversial moves (i.e., opening more charter schools while closing beloved but poor-performing district schools) and focused on policy shifts that flew under the radar but were still meaningful—like Sacramento’s increasing the lag between lease agreement renewals for charter schools. The following is a list of examples of successful and, to date, sustained collaborations that resulted from Compact agreements.

Unified Enrollment | [Denver](#) and [New Orleans](#) implemented a single school-enrollment system for district and charter schools. Rather than having to navigate more than 60 different school application timelines and forms, parents in these cities now simply fill out one form where they rank their choices. The benefits are felt beyond the families. School enrollments are finalized earlier, giving schools more time to prepare for the incoming cohort of students. New Orleans used the enrollment system to address inequities in special education enrollment. The new system gives all students the same odds of scoring a seat in their top choice school.

Common School Performance Framework | Baltimore used the initial Gates Foundation \$100,000 Compact grant to develop a new charter school renewal process. As new standards were used to determine which charter and contract schools would be renewed, the district also reworked [performance standards](#) for district-run schools. The systems share nearly all metrics, save a few specific to charter and contract schools, such as fidelity to mission and financial stability. This alignment allows parents to compare across sectors and encourages the district to be agnostic on governance and focus on quality.

Sharing of High-Quality Instructional Practices | In their initial agreements, 14 of the 16 Compact cities pledged to share knowledge across sectors around what works in the classroom. [Mastery Charter Schools](#), a Philadelphia-based high-performing charter management organization, has partnered with the School District of Philadelphia to provide professional development to teachers at district schools. Education leaders in Boston used the Compact funding to address the high achievement gap in literacy skills for black and Latino boys in second through fourth grades. [The Boston Compact](#) committee identified district and charter schools with a track record of success for this population and awarded them with grants to enable them to disseminate their effective practices for teaching across schools that were struggling to reach similar students. In Spring Branch, Texas, two new co-



locations of district and charter schools made sharing best practices as simple as walking down a hall and helped unite the sectors in a [common goal of broadly raising student achievement to college-ready levels](#). Lastly, New Visions for Public Schools, a nonprofit organization that has created 133 New York City public schools, district and charter, will work with the city's Charter Center to provide [in-depth, inquiry-based curricular and assessment support tied to the Common Core](#) for up to 15 public middle schools. Participating schools will also have the opportunity to directly collaborate with other schools within the larger New Visions network.

INITIAL FINDINGS

In general, district and charter leaders in Compact cities have moved from relationships of distrust and competition to communication and common interests. Progress toward long-term, sustained collaboration is mixed, but many cities have established commitments, partnered on successful projects, and expanded cooperation between sectors. Challenges still exist with leadership transitions, local anti-charter politics, and key leaders' unwillingness to prioritize time and resources for implementation. However, there are many positive lessons to be gleaned from Compact cities' efforts.

It Takes Communication and Time

The most common improvement for collaboration in Compact cities has been open and formalized district-charter communication. This dialogue has tempered emotions and built trust in cities with combative district-charter relations. It has served as a mechanism to codify intentions and develop a plan of action to sustain collaborations already underway, and it has directed the focus to shared responsibility and school quality. The results are stronger relationships and positive momentum toward deeper collaboration. Civil dialogue is a start—but not a complete solution—to increasing high-quality options for students through district-charter collaboration.

Most Compact cities have fairly significant and mature charter school markets; in seven of sixteen cities, 10 percent or more of students are enrolled in charter schools. Cities with a history of district-charter collaboration, such as New Orleans and Hartford, have implemented long-term and systemic changes, while cities new to collaboration showed more measured progress.

It Takes Leadership and Community

Leadership has played a pivotal role in the progress of collaboration in Compact cities, both transformative and destructive. The Gates Foundation required leadership on both sides to commit to collaboration and sign Compacts. Those Compact cities seeing the most progress have most often done so with strong leadership support and when the Compact was part of a larger overall reform strategy. Mayoral control is more common in Compact cities than nationally, with mayors potentially less entrenched in status quo district operations and more open to collaboration. District leadership turnover has shifted momentum for collaboration in many cities, and district leaders' ability to turn commitments into time and resources for collaboration has been mixed. Even charter leaders have created divides among their heterogeneous community with competing agreements and interests.

Successful Compacts rely on commitment and trust from actors across the district and charter communities to sustain efforts even through changing leadership. The open dialogue fostered in Compact cities often extends beyond senior leadership to teachers, administrators, and staff. In some cities, formalized steering committees, subcommittees, and boards broker communication, drive decisions, and continue progress. Cities such as [Boston](#) and [Philadelphia](#) exemplify how the work of collaboration, when carried out by many stakeholders, can continue to progress even in the wake of district leadership turnover or changing political climates.

It Takes Common Causes

Through the Compact efforts, charter and district leaders have focused on common interests and school performance. Many

Compact cities have accomplished quick wins in collaboration, including Boston’s expansion and replication of high-performing schools, Hartford’s sharing professional development offerings, and Denver’s aligning school enrollment systems. However, many have found difficulty collaborating in areas not of mutual benefit or that were highly charged politically—closing low-performing schools, serving students with special needs, and building common accountability systems. Many Compact cities initially agreed to such bold efforts but now must capitalize on the momentum of improved communication, strong leadership, and early successes to realize the potential benefits of stronger collaboration. It is difficult to make the shift from common interest to implementation, but a few of the cities with the strongest histories of district-charter collaboration and a deep commitment to common goals, including New York City and Denver, have implemented sustainable [policies](#) and [efforts](#).

LOOKING AHEAD

Initial progress towards collaboration in Compact cities is tenuous but encouraging. All Compact cities have increased communication and have begun moving away from a combative past. In most of these initial 16 cities, education leaders have sustained broad buy-in and adopted common causes. Increased public awareness of high-performing charter schools and the enthusiasm around the Compact initiative provides impetus for working together. Collaboration between districts and charter schools has resulted in better educational options for some children in underserved neighborhoods, and encouraged district and charter leaders to approach old problems in new ways.

Questions remain. Will initial collaboration between districts and charter schools be sustained beyond a one-time grant? Will the Compact goals and changes in policy become practice? Will districts and the charter community follow up early wins by tackling tougher challenges? Will cities not participating in the Compact follow the lead of these pioneer cities to increase high-quality options for students and families? To answer these questions, CRPE

will continue to track the progress and challenges in each Compact city, documenting the most promising models and analyzing the factors that aid or impede progress and sustainability.

NOTES

1. See the full report: Sarah Yatsko, Elizabeth Cooley Nelson, and Robin Lake, [District-Charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report](#) (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2013).
2. The first and foundational component of the portfolio strategy described in CRPE’s [7 Components of a Portfolio Strategy](#) is “Good Options and Choices for All Families,” a common interest around which charter schools and districts can collaborate.