

# Bridging the District-Charter Divide to Help More Students Succeed

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# About This Report

## Acknowledgments

As of this writing, district and charter leaders in 23 cities have signed *District-Charter Collaboration Compacts*. Each of these cities has received a \$100,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as a signing incentive. Since 2011, just a few months after the first Compacts were signed, the Gates Foundation has funded our work monitoring, supporting, and analyzing the cross-sector collaborative work undertaken in Compact cities. This report is a summary of what CRPE researchers have learned through this work. We thank the Gates Foundation for its support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Foundation.

We are deeply appreciative of the time, thoughtfulness, and honesty that over 100 district and charter leaders from cities that are pursuing collaboration have shared with us. Over the past three years, these leaders helped CRPE researchers to understand the successes, challenges, priorities, and realities of collaborating over the long term across often contentious divisions. This insight informs each finding and recommendation in this report. The authors would also like to acknowledge the contributions made by the editors and reviewers of this report, including Bryan Hassel and James Merriman. Their expertise and insights helped us to sharpen our findings and think more deeply about the work of district-charter collaboration.

## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families. Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools. CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through philanthropy, federal grants, and contracts.

## CRPE Quality Assurance Process

Independent peer review is an integral part of all CRPE research projects. Prior to publication, this document was subjected to a quality assurance process to ensure that: the problem is well formulated; the research approach is well designed and well executed; the data and assumptions are sound; the findings are useful and advance knowledge; the implications and recommendations follow logically from the findings and are explained thoroughly; the documentation is accurate, understandable, cogent, and balanced in tone; the research demonstrates understanding of related previous studies; and the research is relevant, objective, and independent. Peer review was conducted by research or policy professionals who were not members of the project team.

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# Executive Summary

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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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.

***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.***

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.

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.

# Introduction

When Superintendent Fran Gallo took the helm of Central Falls Public Schools in 2007, she easily could have fought area charter schools. Instead, she decided to partner with them.

Central Falls, Rhode Island, is a small, densely populated city where a third of its residents live in poverty. Some 90 percent of students in the struggling local school district qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. In 2011 the city was so strapped for cash, it filed for bankruptcy.<sup>2</sup>

Superintendent Gallo knew surrounding districts saw charter schools as the enemy, but a round of home visits to families convinced her to think differently. Gallo visited a mother overjoyed by the news that her child had landed a spot in The Learning Community School, a charter school. Gallo visited the school to find out why. While the charter school drew from the same population as the district, it had more success teaching elementary students to read at or above grade level. Gallo was so impressed that she asked the school to partner with the district and share what was working.

The move strained Gallo's relationships with educators around the state, but she persevered. Though bumpy at first, the partnership improved reading outcomes at the district schools, confirming Gallo's hopes. Emboldened, Gallo pursued partnerships with other area charter schools. In 2011, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation recognized her work, including Central Falls with 15 other cities like Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Denver in the Foundation's first round of grants designed to spur or expand district-charter collaboration.

Fast forward to 2016: Central Falls Public Schools has a new superintendent, but the district-charter partnerships continue to deepen, benefiting children and families from both types of schools. One charter school has improved its services for students with disabilities thanks to high-caliber district expertise. Two high schools—one district, one charter—are partnering to cultivate high expectations and a college-going culture. District and charter elementary schools are working together to adopt and hone a new math curriculum. And teachers from district and charter schools have collaborated to smooth their transitions to Common Core State Standards. Former *New York Times* columnist Joe Nocero wrote of the initial district-charter partnership in Central Falls: "I haven't seen anything that makes more sense."<sup>3</sup>

Cooperation doesn't just make sense; in some cases, it is vital to ensuring that every child in every neighborhood has access to a great school in cities where charter schools are serving a critical mass of students. But animosity between school districts and charter schools has been the norm since the nation's first charter school opened in 1992. Part of the premise in the fledgling charter movement was that charter schools would both pressure districts to compete *and* serve as laboratories for public education. With few exceptions, however, districts reacted to new charter schools with open hostility, resentment, and disdain, rather than looking for opportunities to learn from successes and working together to address problems.

That is now starting to change in some cities. In at least 35 urban school districts with significant numbers of charter schools, efforts are under way to jointly improve instruction, align policies, address inequities, or garner efficiencies. About a dozen of these districts—like Denver, Boston,

*Some communities are seeing cooperation become the “new normal.” But the far more common scenario has charter and district leaders at loggerheads, preventing joint work.*

Indianapolis, and Cleveland—are using cooperation, also commonly referred to as district-charter collaboration or partnerships, to drive decisions and address systemic challenges, including tracking school performance, student enrollment, and school closure. For some, the partnership developed out of a common desire to work together on behalf of students. For others, the partnership is more of a quid pro quo, with each side holding something the other needs. Regardless of what first drew the two sectors to the table, some communities are seeing cooperation become the “new normal.”

This cooperation resulted in significant policy “wins” for students and families:

- In Philadelphia, charter schools have partnered with Philadelphia Public Schools to **replace some of the district’s worst neighborhood schools** with high-performing charter schools that accept the same neighborhood students.
- Cities including Denver, New Orleans, and Camden (and others) have implemented common enrollment systems for citywide district and charter schools. Early **analysis** by CRPE researchers in these three cities shows that **common enrollment systems** have reduced inequities in the enrollment processes by eliminating opportunities for assertive or well-connected parents to enroll their students outside the official mechanisms, and by improving parent information.
- New Orleans and Washington, D.C., have **significantly** moved the needle on equity and transparency for students and families in **discipline practices** in both sectors through collaborative efforts.
- Along with their centralized system for expulsion, New Orleans has also developed a **collaborative way** to help all schools serve students with special needs through a **coordinated cost-sharing system**.
- Several cities, including Chicago, Denver, and New Orleans, have created a common **accountability tool** that allows families, as well as district and charter administrators, to track school performance across a city regardless of who governs that school.

Despite these successes, the far more common scenario has charter and district leaders at loggerheads, preventing joint work. Some education leaders from both sectors question whether cooperation is worth the effort. Charter school advocates question the wisdom of using their resources to help a district school instead of simply opening more charter schools for more students. They fear that close partnerships with districts might erode their own autonomies and effectiveness. District leaders worry that cooperation will cost them too much in political capital, with their teachers unions, community advocates, or school boards seeing them as too “charter-friendly.”

Given these concerns, it is reasonable to ask: Why are education leaders spending time on cooperation? What is the payback that makes it worthwhile? Are they accomplishing something real or is it just empty, feel-good public relations? For charter school and district leaders considering cooperation, what kinds of partnerships are most effective? For state policy and philanthropic leaders, are efforts worth supporting?

This report helps answer these questions and builds on prior **research** from CRPE. CRPE, with support from the Gates Foundation, has tracked cooperation 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 attends a great school. We have conducted hundreds of

phone and field interviews on cooperation with district, charter, and community leaders in the cities that, like Central Falls, have formalized their partnerships by signing *District-Charter Collaboration Compacts* supported by the Gates Foundation. More recently, we have been working with the Florida Department of Education to monitor and support work in two school districts that competed for and were awarded a collaboration grant that was also partially funded through the Gates Foundation.

Our work has surfaced some fundamentals about the promises and challenges faced when long-time competitors try to work together:

**In cities with sizeable charter school student populations, cross-sector policy coordination is a necessity, not a nicety.** Done well, the efforts solve critical problems for both charter and district schools, and most importantly, for students and families—in areas like school discipline, enrollment, transportation, and special education services. Cooperation is not about a Pollyanna desire to get along. Cooperation can benefit students and families; its absence can hurt them.

But despite the urgent need, **cooperation is too often treated as a time-limited, forced marriage rather than a sustained effort and long-term relationship.** One district official recently told CRPE that the city’s cooperation “had expired” because the grant that supported it had ended. Effective cooperation is a long-term commitment, not a project with a due date.

**Some cooperation efforts are simply not worth the effort.** In many cities, district-charter cooperation has not survived leadership transitions or shifts in politics; the partnerships have petered out, wasting education leaders’ time and even leading to increased mistrust between the sectors. In particular, cooperation does not seem worthwhile if there is only weak commitment on both sides, and if no clear incentives or evidence-based strategies exist to support initiatives. In these situations, cooperation is less of a necessity and more of a nicety.

**The cities logging serious progress are addressing chronic challenges and common goals for improving quality and equity, rather than getting mired in a litany of short-term tasks.** As the district superintendent in a city that continues to successfully sustain cooperation said, “We know the things we have in common are far stronger than the things that divide us.”<sup>4</sup>

**Top officials must commit to cooperation and ensure that their entire organization follows suit.** Too often, cooperation efforts are plagued by hostile political forces, inattention from key decision makers, or failure by those leaders to ensure cooperation takes root and is supported at all levels of the district or charter organization. If, as we argue, cooperation is essential to the growth and effectiveness of high-quality public schools in cities that offer choice, more supports and interventions are needed from local and state leaders, among others.

CRPE has identified the most promising opportunities for these supports and interventions:

- **District and charter leaders** can start by prioritizing the most timely and pressing needs that could be met through cooperation, moving toward adopting a clear philosophy on cooperation’s role in their city to help others understand and support it, building broad coalitions to push collaborative initiatives, developing targeted partnerships while maintaining momentum toward systemic efforts, and creating clear governance structures to move the work forward.
- **State education agencies** can consider ways to support local cooperation through financial incentives, accountability systems that put district and charter schools on an even playing field, and scalable family-friendly policies around enrollment, accessible and transparent school information, and transportation to school.
- **Funders** can support the work cities want to do and help them build the coalitions and support networks needed to sustain long-term, cross-sector cooperation.

This report elucidates these findings and recommendations by exploring these questions:

- ▶ **Should cooperation be considered a necessity, rather than a nicety?**
- ▶ **Where are cross-sector cooperation efforts happening?**
- ▶ **What is the progress of cooperation to date?**
- ▶ **What types of cooperation are most worth the effort?**
- ▶ **What makes cooperation succeed or fail?**
- ▶ **What are the implications and recommendations for district and charter leaders, states, and funders interested in supporting these kinds of partnerships?**

## DISTRICT-CHARTER COLLABORATION COMPACT FAST FACTS

Currently, 23 districts have signed *District-Charter Collaboration Compacts* with charter partners. Sponsored and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, these Compacts outline cross-sector goals and projects and are intended to bring together the often-divisive district and charter sectors in a city to better serve students. Each city received \$100,000 to support the work, though seven cities were awarded more significant funding. In addition, two Florida counties have developed district-charter collaborations in response to an initiative by the Florida Department of Education, which has a statewide Gates Foundation-supported Compact.

### Signed in 2010:

- Baltimore, MD<sup>P</sup>
- Denver, CO<sup>\*P</sup>
- Hartford, CT<sup>\*P</sup>
- Los Angeles, CA<sup>P</sup>
- Minneapolis, MN
- Nashville, TN<sup>P</sup>
- RSD New Orleans, LA<sup>\*P</sup>
- New York City, NY<sup>\*P</sup>

### Signed in 2011:

- Austin, TX
- Boston, MA<sup>\*</sup>
- Central Falls, RI<sup>P</sup>
- Chicago, IL<sup>P</sup>
- Philadelphia, PA<sup>\*</sup>
- Sacramento, CA<sup>P</sup>
- Spring Branch, TX<sup>\*P</sup>

### Signed in 2013:

- Aldine, TX
- Franklin-McKinley, CA
- Lawrence, MA<sup>P</sup>

### Signed in 2014:

- Spokane, WA<sup>P</sup>
- Tulsa, OK<sup>P</sup>

### Signed in 2015:

- Cleveland, OH<sup>P</sup>
- Grand Prairie, TX<sup>P</sup>
- Indianapolis, IN<sup>P</sup>

### Florida DOE Compacts (2014):

- Miami-Dade County
- Duval County (Jacksonville)

CRPE also tracks district-charter collaboration work developing in approximately 10 other cities that do not have Gates Foundation-funded Compacts but show a commitment to work together.

\* Indicates seven cities that were awarded more significant Gates Foundation funding to support collaboration work.

P Indicates cities that, at the time they signed their Compacts, were moving toward the Portfolio system, where public schools operate on a level playing field and have similar kinds of autonomies and accountabilities as those typically associated with charter schools alone.



Some districts are working to meet that challenge: Cleveland and San Antonio, for example, have both sharply increased the diversity of their traditional public school offerings in the last five years. But most districts see charter schools as having unfair advantages and operating on an uneven playing field, which makes cooperation more difficult. A 2016 Mathematica Policy Research study interviewed district representatives in seven cities with active cooperation; the study found that 56 percent of those interviewees believed that charter schools served a different student population.<sup>5</sup> In particular, respondents said they believed that “charter schools serve higher achieving students and fewer English language learners or special education students, and that charter schools expel students with discipline problems.” The study also revealed that district officials thought collective bargaining constrained their ability to both compete and collaborate with the charter sector, citing, for example, how contractual work hours limited district teachers’ ability to engage in cross-sector professional development.<sup>6</sup>

Whether these challenges, perceptions, and tensions feed turf battles or simply result in a lack of coordination, students and families ultimately pay the price.

Amid uncoordinated charter school growth, some neighborhoods may have their pick of strong district and charter options while others are “quality school deserts,” leaving families who do not have the time or means to drive their child to school with no options beyond their failing neighborhood school. Families face a dearth of clear and transparent information on schools and services, a lack of transportation to schools, and the challenges of navigating multiple information and enrollment systems. All of this has made accessing choice and good schools difficult for many families, especially parents with less education, minority parents (who tend to have higher rates of poverty), and parents of children with special needs—raising fundamental equity questions.<sup>7</sup>

**FIGURE 2. The Cost of Continued Contention**

FOR COMMUNITIES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fewer school options for families</li> <li>• Lower likelihood that every child in every neighborhood is served by a quality school</li> <li>• Lack of clear information for finding best school match for child</li> </ul>	
FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS	FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lost opportunity for change and innovation</li> <li>• Inability to learn from charter work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time and resources spent fighting with district (or being ignored)</li> <li>• Persistent marginalized status</li> <li>• Intractable limits on reach, scale, resources (especially facilities)</li> </ul>

The hit families take from this lack of cross-sector coordination is painfully exemplified in Detroit, where parents have a high level of choice among a proliferation of mostly low-quality district and charter schools, thanks to a lack of accountability, oversight, and coordination. A dozen different government agencies sponsor schools without any coordination, resulting in a morass for families: no one is taking responsibility for transportation, for closing low-performing schools, or for ensuring students with special needs are well served. Detroit parents describe choosing a school in a “hypercompetitive” environment as a saturated system of schools battle for enrollment from a dwindling number of students. And they describe the challenge of finding a high-quality school when some neighborhoods have many school options, but none with a passing grade.<sup>8</sup> In 2013, only 4 percent of Detroit Public Schools’ 4th graders were proficient in math. Detroit charter schools slightly outperform district schools, but their students are still among the lowest-performing in the nation.<sup>9</sup>

***Cities like Detroit demonstrate that choice is a powerful force, but it must be accompanied by thoughtful government oversight and supports for quality, accountability, and equity—not left to function as a market free-for-all.***

Cities like Detroit demonstrate that choice is a powerful force, but it must be accompanied by thoughtful government oversight and supports for quality, accountability, and equity—not left to function as a market free-for-all. Cooperation can help ensure that schools of choice serve the most challenging students. Coordinated efforts in a community can empower all parents with information, transportation, and other support systems. Without these efforts, families most often end up with a lot of choice and precious little in the way of better options.

While many see cooperation challenges as intractable, cities are starting to chip away at them armed with enlightened self-interest, a little goodwill, and budding trust, coordination, and creative problem solving. Figure 3 includes some of the benefits realized from effective cooperation. A growing number of district and charter leaders now recognize that they each have something to gain by working with, versus against, each other. Together, they can:

**Learn from each other.** Autonomy allows charter schools to experiment and innovate. Districts have collaborated with charter schools to take advantage of innovations in leadership training, instructional strategies like personalized learning, and Common Core implementation and curriculum development.

**In Boston, district, charter, and Catholic school educators received a three-year sequence of joint professional development to improve instruction for underserved students, including English language learners, special education students, and black and Latino males.**

**Work to address coordination problems that surface for charter schools, the district, or families.**

When choice becomes the norm, parents often experience challenging logistics that affect their ability to choose a school (for example, transportation and enrollment processes).

**In Denver, Washington, D.C., and New Orleans, most or all public schools—district and charter—now participate in “common enrollment systems” that include standardized enrollment forms, timelines, and a centralized lottery and assignment process. New Orleans’ OneApp common enrollment system covers some 89 percent of its public schools, as well as 29 private schools in the Louisiana Scholarship Program and early childhood programs, including private schools and child-care centers receiving public funding. In these cities, common enrollment systems have led to greater transparency around admissions, better school information, and a more manageable and fairer enrollment process.<sup>10</sup>**

**Locate new or relaunched schools in neighborhoods that need them.** Without coordination, state agencies or other independent charter school authorizers (for example, colleges and universities) often create uneven school supply in a city: too many in some neighborhoods, not enough high-quality schools in others.

**After a series of failed efforts to turn around Philadelphia’s worst district schools, the school district recently turned to nonprofit charter management organizations, a move that is hotly contested by many of the same groups that opposed the for-profit school model of earlier years. Unlike the earlier effort, the charter schools were authorized as part of the district’s Renaissance Schools program, which provided opportunities for community input into selecting operators and retained the neighborhood schools’ traditional assignment boundaries.**

**Address pressing equity questions.** By nature of being schools of choice, charter schools can see their enrollment skew in undesirable ways if not intentionally watched and planned for. Though the reasons are complex, students with special needs, English language learner students, and other unique populations may not attend charter public schools at similar rates as they attend district public schools.<sup>11</sup> Because charter schools typically set their own policies on discipline, they may suspend or expel students using different criteria than district schools, forcing districts to accept students midyear who have been expelled from charter schools.<sup>12</sup> Charter schools often do not accept new students midyear or after traditional “entry” grades (kindergarten, 6th, and 9th grades), leaving districts concerned that test score comparisons are unfair and do not reflect different realities in what students are served.<sup>13</sup> Charter schools, for their part, often argue that it is unfair that they lack access to the buildings, funding, and policy environment they need to succeed.

**In 2014, New Orleans’ state-run Recovery School District tried to remove financial disincentives around serving special education students by aligning special education dollars with the level of service a student needs, sharing the costs of rare but extremely expensive special education placements across schools, and incentivizing high-performing schools to expand their special education offerings. A charter-run fellowship program offers professional development for special education coordinators citywide. Furthermore, the Recovery School District and New Orleans schools created a centralized expulsion system to make final determination on student expulsions fairer.**

**Use each other’s competitive advantages.** Increasingly, districts are partnering with high-performing charter schools to replace chronically low-performing district schools. Charter schools have shown interest in districts’ specialized expertise or economies of scale.

**The YES Prep and KIPP charter networks tap the Houston-area Spring Branch Independent School District’s economies of scale to provide their charter schools with food, transportation, facilities, technology, and maintenance services as part of the parties’ funding agreement. (District and charter leaders still must negotiate unanticipated costs.) The district also provides the networks’ charter school students with equitable per-pupil funding.**

**FIGURE 3. Cooperation Can Result in Tangible Benefits**

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

***Cooperation allows districts and charter schools to share resources and responsibilities in a way that benefits both parties and the families they serve.***

While some argue for standing aside and letting free-market forces do their job, increasing evidence suggests that this approach is, at least in the short term, imposing real costs on real families and exacerbating inequities, making students and families the true victims of the discord and disharmony. Cooperation lets the parties come together to address key issues like those detailed earlier in a voluntary, rational way. Cooperation allows

districts and charter schools to share resources and responsibilities in a way that benefits both parties and the families they serve. Done well, cooperation demonstrates that the sum is greater than its parts.

# Cross-Sector Cooperation Arises in Cities Large and Small

In some communities, forward-thinking superintendents, board members, and leaders of individual charter schools or charter management organizations (CMOs) have collaborated across sectors in an informal, ad hoc way for years. These handshake deals tend to be pragmatic: narrowly focused on a particular problem or opportunity at a given point in time. But they also tend to lack staying power, often petering out once the individuals involved have moved on or outside support dries up.

*Cooperation is a natural outgrowth of a philosophy that says results matter more than who operates a school.*

In contrast, broader, more durable initiatives that deliver real impacts have taken hold in cities where structural and strategic reforms have *demand*ed cooperation. Cities following a portfolio strategy are moving toward a system where all public schools operate on a level playing field and have the same kinds of autonomies and accountabilities as those typically associated only with

charter schools. In the portfolio cities CRPE tracks, many districts partner with charter schools to better serve students. In these cities, cooperation is a natural outgrowth of a philosophy that says results matter more than who operates a school.

Regardless of whether the parties' initial motivations for collaborating were narrow or broad, 23 cities have formalized their efforts with the Gates Foundation-funded *District-Charter Cooperation Compacts*, which outline cross-sector goals and projects (see Figure 4). In addition, two Florida counties have developed district-charter cooperation in response to an initiative by the Florida Department of Education, which has a statewide Gates Foundation-supported Compact.

**FIGURE 4.** Localities That Have Signed *District-Charter Cooperation Compacts*



CRPE also tracks roughly a dozen other cities that do not have formal Compact agreements, but have shown either a strong, sustained commitment to working together (like Washington, D.C.) or are just beginning to explore small-scale cooperation efforts.

Our monitoring efforts have led us to see cross-sector cooperation in all stages of maturity, with each stage building on the one before. Figure 5 provides a detailed breakdown of CRPE’s identified six stages of cooperation.

*Emerging cooperation* is the first step beyond the typical baseline district-charter relationship of conflict and distrust. The *Emerging* stage usually includes building relationships, creating trust, and dispelling myths. This can happen through teacher-to-teacher or principal-to-principal interactions—such as through joint professional learning communities—or can be spurred by high-level problem-solving meetings between leaders. While this initial stage is often slow and low on tangible results, it helps build a foundation for higher-impact cooperation.

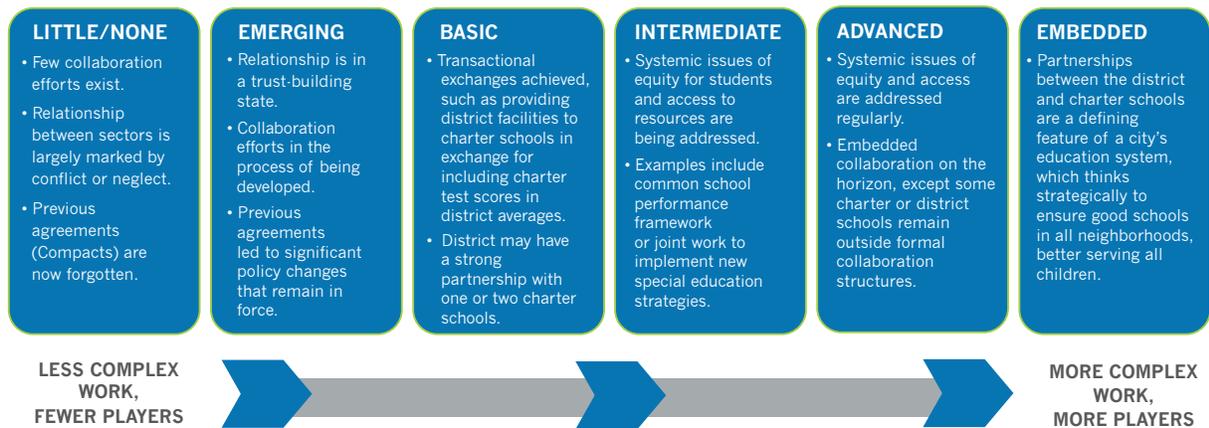
In the *Basic cooperation* stage, partnerships drive more practical results, such as districts providing charter schools with facilities in exchange for including charter school test scores in the district’s average for state accountability purposes. While often useful, these efforts tend to tinker around the edges of each sector’s core “turf” issues, whether charter schools’ autonomies or districts’ political capital and resources.

Districts and charter schools reach the *Intermediate* and *Advanced* cooperation stages when they work more robustly to improve equity for students and families. Often, deals are struck around shared resources and shared responsibilities for serving all students, such as in the special education arena. In many cities, charter schools have been faulted for low enrollment of students with the most intensive (and costly) needs; charter schools in turn often point to not getting their fair share of resources to help them effectively serve such students. Cooperation on reworking funding policies can help alleviate these concerns (as Los Angeles, Denver, and New Orleans did).<sup>14</sup>

Cooperation can also help charter schools boost recruitment efforts among families with special education students—such as participating in district-sponsored school fairs—or tap district expertise to improve the special education services they offer. Likewise, some cities use their deeper cross-sector connections to develop a common school performance framework: this provides a common standard for charter renewal or school district management decisions on school-level accountability and helps parents navigate school choice options with apples-to-apples comparisons among schools. The *Intermediate* stage typically means that a majority of a city’s charter schools are working with the district on at least one common area. The *Advanced* stage means nearly all charter schools are working with the district on more than one common area.

**FIGURE 5.**

## Transactional Exchanges Can Lead to More Strategic Cooperation



***Embedded cooperation is described as all types of schools and authorizers working in tandem to ensure that good schools are in every neighborhood and that every child has access to a variety of high-quality options.***

We expect cooperation reaches the *Embedded* stage if district-charter partnerships become a defining feature of a city's education system. *Embedded* cooperation is described as all types of schools and authorizers working in tandem to ensure that good schools are in every neighborhood and that every child has access to a variety of high-quality options. Such strategic cooperation may require charter schools to agree not to locate in over-saturated neighborhoods. Or it may involve district contracts with charter schools to turn around troubled campuses or operate specific programs. For parents and students, navigating between the district and charter

sectors is seamless because the boundaries between them are nearly invisible. Families have a one-stop shop for enrolling in school: when they have a concern the school principal cannot resolve, they can expect the district office and/or charter authorizer to resolve it using near-identical processes and systems. Clearly, this *Embedded* cooperation embodies an ideal, but it is one worth striving for to benefit families.

# Cooperation Has Not Progressed Steadily

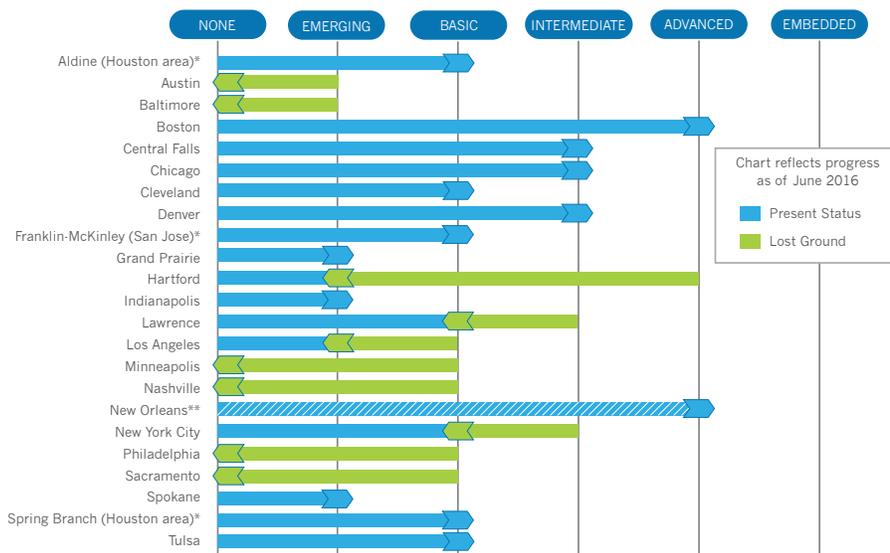
Most of the 23 Compact cities have not yet reached the more mature cooperation stages: 11 are in the earliest stages, 7 are still at the *Basic* stage, and just 2 (Boston and New Orleans) have achieved and maintained *Advanced* cooperation and where *Embedded* cooperation seems just on the horizon. Boston benefits from cooperation facilitation by the Boston Compact, a separately funded third-party entity. New Orleans, unique for being a nearly all-charter city, sees cooperation largely between charter schools and between the charter schools and their authorizers—the state-run Recovery School District and the local Orleans Parish School Board. The independently run charter schools and the school district have developed norms for coordinated problem solving and common policies,

*Cooperation in most Compact cities ebbs and flows based on shifting commitments and personalities.*

such as student expulsion procedures, that are necessary for an efficient and equitable city school system. But New Orleans' cooperation falls short of *Embedded* because too many examples of parallel systems persist between the largely state-run charter schools and the relatively few schools (district and charter) run by the local school board. This will likely change as the system prepares to merge under one elected board.

Cooperation in most Compact cities ebbs and flows based on shifting commitments and personalities. As the green bars in Figure 6 show, nearly half the cities have slid back from earlier-won gains.

**FIGURE 6.** Cooperation in Localities With Compacts Often Falls Short of Potential and Gains Can be Lost



\*School districts listed, such as Sacramento or Indianapolis, may not align to city boundaries.  
 \*\*Collaboration in New Orleans is primarily within the charter school sector, given that charters serve over 90% of students.

Though discouraging, Figure 6 depicts the real challenges in moving warring parties to mutual action and in mustering the required leadership and commitment to overcome rivalries and ideological differences in pursuit of better outcomes for students and families.

And yet despite such difficulties, cooperation with real impact is surfacing in cities even without the aid of a grant or other incentive. In Washington, D.C., charter and district officials have worked together to bring more innovation and personalized learning to their city and developed common reporting of student suspension data through their Cross-Sector Cooperation Task Force. The city's student discipline reporting efforts were accompanied by citywide drops in suspension rates overall and among specific student groups, such as those with special needs. Expulsion rates fell by almost half. In Oakland, leaders from the district, charter schools, and third-party organizations have signed an Equity Pledge, a Compact-like document that is guiding work around developing a common school performance framework, attracting talent, equitably allocating facilities, and more. Atlanta KIPP charter schools have shared professional development with Atlanta Public Schools with the goal of boosting student achievement and developing a positive school climate. Charter and district schools in Providence, Rhode Island, are collaborating to pilot a personalized learning program while being trained by Summit Public Schools, a CMO from California.

***Many leaders who signed Compacts reported that the documents helped anchor the work and provided a road map for what would be attempted.***

Increased interest in cooperation is apparent both in what CRPE has seen as we monitor activity around the country as well as in media coverage. But is a grant necessary to spur cooperation? Given the evidence of cooperation outside the Gates Foundation's Compact grants, the answer appears to be no. That said, Compact leaders certainly reported that the grants helped them in many ways, like enabling them to follow through on their

commitments by funding dedicated staff time and big projects like common enrollment systems. In some cities, a grant could make the difference in whether cooperation gets off the ground or not. Many leaders who signed Compacts reported that the documents helped anchor the work and provided a road map for what would be attempted. But Compacts also could quickly become stale and forgotten when goals became more difficult to realize than anticipated or the leader who signed the document left.

In the following sections, we discuss examples of the most and least successful partnerships and what differentiates successful efforts from those that fail or stagnate.

# Choosing the Right Focus for Cooperation Can Make Time and Efforts Worthwhile

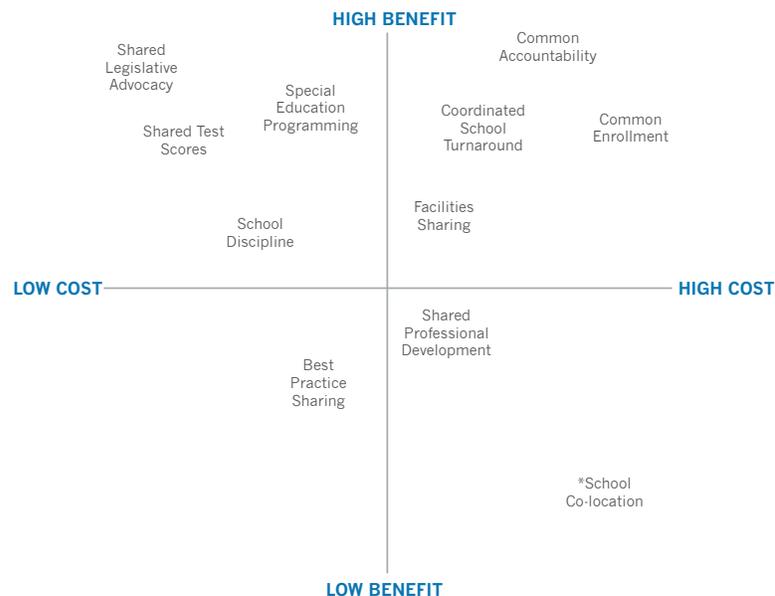
Cooperation is hard work. Beyond the universal elements needed to give potential partners the best shot at success, the parties involved should consider what specific cooperation activities will yield the greatest payoff for schools and families. Cooperation can play out in various policy, operational, and instructional areas. But many efforts require more resources (in time, money, and political capital) than leaders might find is warranted.

Potential partners in a city must weigh uniquely local factors: Do the cooperative projects meet the needs of both charter school and district leaders as well as those of the local community? Do the projects consider the local politics and the specific partners' strengths and weaknesses?

In CRPE's work on cooperation, more generalized findings have surfaced on the cost-benefit equation for certain common types of cooperative projects. These findings can help those contemplating new cooperation initiatives—including sponsors such as mayors, state leaders, or nonprofit harbormasters—decide what projects to tackle.

Figure 7 maps the most common areas of cooperation along two continua: the benefits accrued and the resources or costs required, based on the past five years of monitoring cooperation initiatives in cities with formalized Gates Foundation-supported Compacts.

**FIGURE 7.** In Compact Cities, Different Costs and Benefits for Different Types of Cooperation



\*For school co-locations, there may be different costs/benefits for academic improvement versus co-locations for the sole purpose of providing charter schools access to district space.

## Low Cost/Low Benefit

**Shared best practices:** Every city that signed a district-charter Compact included language in the document pledging to “share best practices” across sectors. Austin’s Compact lists the phrase a dozen times in eight pages. Sharing took several forms, including district schools hosting tours for charter teachers and vice versa, opening up each sector’s professional development to educators from the other sector, and identifying star teachers or leaders who could become mentors across school types. While most of these initiatives involve relatively little effort, they also often failed to produce long-term tangible benefits aside from schools getting to know each other, dispelling some myths, and inspiring negligible changes. Even otherwise successful Compact cities, like Boston, have seen best-practice sharing efforts fall short: one that intended to replicate successful strategies for serving black and Latino boys was eventually reworked when educators realized the difficulty of transplanting practices into different school settings. While some failures are to be expected—and the benefits of educator to educator relationship-building are hard to see and measure—frustration around time wasted can mount, diverting attention from and souring attitudes for other higher-benefit cooperation efforts.

## High Cost/Low Benefit

**Co-locations:** Some cities have sited a charter school in the same building as a district school, either to utilize unused classrooms or, more ambitiously, to improve academic performance by housing a high-performing school with a low-performing one. As CRPE detailed in a 2016 report, co-location for school improvement is a difficult and risky undertaking and it requires large investments of time and effort. Some cities that attempted this are seeing some modest improvements over time in the struggling schools, and some co-locations have inspired deep connections between educators and shifts in school practices (more commonly by good luck than by good design). But they can also intensify divisions between schools—co-locations in cities like Los Angeles and New York City have sparked political backlash—and produce little academic benefit. And the mechanics are complex: district and charter schools can have vastly different cultures, co-locating elementary students with middle or high school students creates natural friction, and staff cooperation runs up against the usual snags of differing schedules, differing student bodies, and competing priorities.<sup>15</sup>

Yet it is not hard to see the appeal for sharing costs and/or education strategies: a local high-performing charter school needs space and the district has a struggling school in a half-empty building.<sup>16</sup> Co-locations that aim to boost academic performance and instill a high-expectations culture typically include shared school missions and joint staff-to-staff work on instruction. But little evidence to date indicates that co-locations can reliably turn around a failing school. Even in the Houston-area Spring Branch district, a system often held up as a co-location exemplar, the arrangement continues to require significant coordination and school leader time. And after three years, student gains are modest. Leaders need to ask if co-location’s added stress on students, teachers, and principals is worth the payoff if the goal is academic gains alone. However, any city that is serious about increasing the number of great schools, regardless of label, must find a long-term public facilities solution for charter schools, even if it sets back cooperation on other fronts.

**Shared professional development:** Several cities have attempted structured professional development efforts around things like Common Core implementation. For the most part, these efforts have not produced much in the way of tangible learning gains, but they require a significant investment of time and resources. However, more concrete training efforts show more promise. Achievement First, a CMO, partnered with Hartford Public Schools in Connecticut to train aspiring district principals in the Achievement First leadership training program. Currently, a total of nine have entered the program, seven have completed the program, and six are now leading Hartford Public Schools. Reviews from the district are strong, and principals are considered well trained. The school board’s positive support was key; when external funding ended, the district funded the program itself.

## Low Cost/High Benefit

**Shared advocacy:** Some cities, like Hartford, Chicago, and Philadelphia, are pursuing efforts like shared legislative advocacy to address state policies that create an uneven playing field, such as the school funding formula in Philadelphia. Major school districts already have lobbyists at the state capitol, as do associations for school boards, administrators, and teachers. Charter networks may have them, too. [Cleveland's Compact](#) includes a subcommittee for just this task, with plans to prioritize work on shared funding challenges, changes to state policy on charter authorizing, and smaller regulations that aggravate both sectors, such as how school attendance is logged. When both sectors coordinate their efforts, they can be a powerful voice for bipartisan legislation that smooths cross-sector cooperation, increases revenues, and/or wins flexibilities from well-intentioned but burdensome state laws that stymie innovations designed to help students.

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**Student discipline:** Through policy and systems coordination, New Orleans and Washington, D.C., have significantly improved the equity and transparency of student discipline practices in both sectors. D.C.'s expulsion and suspension rates have been on the decline for the past three years since implementing a policy on transparency in discipline through their Equity Reports. Most significantly, even larger declines in suspension rates have been seen for students with special needs and for black students, two groups that traditionally have the highest rates of school discipline.<sup>17</sup>

In New Orleans, district and charter leaders came together to create universal school discipline standards, including a tightly defined list of infractions that could result in expulsion. Once the list was finalized, all public

schools in the city began using the Louisiana Recovery School District's centralized school expulsion system to make final determinations on expulsion requests. The system not only helped ensure that behavioral expectations were more consistent from school to school, it also tracked the students that were expelled to make sure they were placed in a new school and that they continued to receive services. In each year since implementing a centralized system for all public schools, expulsion rates have shown a steady downward trend, and there seems to be more interest in examining practices and considering alternatives to harsh discipline. This process is more "fair, transparent, and efficient" for students and families.<sup>18</sup>

**Shared special education efforts:** New Orleans had struggled with the same problem as many cities with large charter sectors: how to allow charter schools with the same level of resources to effectively serve students with special needs. New Orleans (through Orleans Parish School Board and the Recovery School District) developed a new system of distributing per-pupil funding to schools in a way that is better aligned with the true cost of serving their special needs students (based on minutes of service needed, by their disability). They also created a citywide fund for catastrophic costs. While it is too early to tell whether this access to more equitable funding for charter schools will translate to better academic outcomes for students with special needs, it provides a promising framework for how cities can improve access for all students to attend the school that can serve them the best, without creating burdens for that school.<sup>19</sup>

In Denver, the school district tapped two local CMOs to create new, specialized special education services, providing more access for students with special needs to attend the school of their choice. Denver Public Schools had longstanding programs for students with special needs that required more specialized services at specific schools, called "center programs." Spurred by the [Compact](#)

agreement, as of 2015, 10 of these center programs had transitioned from being held at district schools to charter schools, with the goal of reaching 20 programs at charter schools (out of 132 total).<sup>20</sup> The district provides help with funding, training, and development of the model, and the charter school takes on the role of leading the program.<sup>21</sup> This 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 those served in charter schools. After the center programs were created within the charter sector, district and charter leaders re-convened to reflect on the special education students for whom the center programs were not the right fit. Together, district and charter leaders traveled the country to research inclusion models, resulting in the creation of four schools—two district and two charter—with high rates of students with special needs receiving instruction within general education classrooms.

## High Cost/High Benefit

**Common enrollment systems:** Efforts like common enrollment systems—which typically include standardized enrollment forms, timelines, and a centralized lottery and student assignment process across sectors—can be a heavy lift and require deep, sustained commitment to succeed. But they directly benefit families, including some of the city’s most vulnerable. Cities must find a willing system host, build the choice algorithm (which can require complex tradeoffs such as offering in-neighborhood schools versus sibling preferences), explain and publicize the system, and help parents navigate it. Charter schools have to give up autonomy on application materials, deadlines, and backfill policies. District schools must reconsider making at least some of their long-established attendance zones less rigid and rise above the mindset that they are helping competitors fill their schools. But this hard work benefits families in many ways: those with English language learners and children with special needs can learn about options they assumed were not available to them, and all families get a one-stop shop for entry instead of having to face multiple—and potentially off-putting—applications. Ultimately, these systems help ensure that all families have equal opportunity to choose a school that best fits their child’s needs.

*Efforts like common enrollment systems can be a heavy lift and require deep, sustained commitment to succeed. But they directly benefit families, including some of the city’s most vulnerable.*

Most or all public schools in Denver, Washington D.C., and New Orleans now participate in common enrollment systems that have led to greater transparency around admissions, better school information, and a more manageable and fairer enrollment process.<sup>22</sup> It is hard to imagine that high-charter cities like D.C. and New Orleans could ensure equity of access without their common enrollment systems. Common enrollment could help tame the chaotic nature of Detroit’s public school system if the idea gains traction there. Despite the complex work involved, cities should not be afraid to tackle the hard stuff.

**Common accountability frameworks:** Like enrollment systems, common accountability frameworks can provide parents a simple way to navigate a wide variety of school types in a city, and can also provide a fair, well-informed, and transparent way to oversee schools for government agencies tasked with making decisions about the school system. Building a common accountability framework takes time, leadership, and consensus building to create a tool that represents all types of schools without being diluted by exceptions. But the process can be worth the effort: leaders from Chicago Public Schools, which uses a School Quality Ratings Policy to evaluate all district and charter schools, report that it has helped school leaders be more proactive about school improvement, and that it is overall a better evaluation system than they had before.<sup>23</sup>

**Coordinated school replacements / turnarounds:** While sometimes politically difficult, and with high costs of time and capacity to make a smooth transition, using CMOs to turn around persistently low-performing district schools—when done well and with attention to community need—shows promise for building higher-quality schools. CRPE’s Ashley Jochim describes two such recent examples:<sup>24</sup>

- Camden, New Jersey, posted some of the worst student outcomes of any district in the state, with only half of the city’s high school students graduating and 90 percent of the schools in the bottom 5 percent of student achievement statewide. Under the state-appointed superintendent, Paymon Rouhanifard, three large charter networks have won approval for up to 15 new schools. In 2015, the district announced a streamlined enrollment process that retained a guaranteed seat at the neighborhood school. While the district has its critics, opposition has been relatively silent compared to other state takeovers in New Jersey and elsewhere.
- In 2010, Massachusetts reformed the state’s accountability system. The Achievement Gap Act provided new power to the State Board and Commissioner of Education to intervene in schools and districts in the lowest tier of the state’s accountability system. Lawrence was the first school district in Massachusetts taken over under the new law. Prior to takeover, Lawrence posted outcomes that put it in the bottom five districts statewide with only half of students graduating within four years. Between 2013 and 2014, the district instituted several changes: reduced spending in the central office, enhanced school autonomy, partnerships with charter operators to manage turnarounds, investments in teacher and principal pipelines, a new collective-bargaining agreement that ended step-and-lane increases, and expanded learning time. The district worked collaboratively with the teachers union on the new contract and the union has managed the turnaround of at least one of Lawrence’s low-performing schools. Because of the collaborative approach, the turnaround effort has faced little opposition.

**Weighing costs and benefits:** It should be evident from this analysis that not all cooperation efforts are worth the time, especially those involving loose strategies for sharing best practices. Anyone considering a cross-sector initiative should take such dynamics into account. It is also true, however, that exceptions to these rules always exist. While an effort to share effective practices for black and Latino boys did not work as well as leaders in Boston had hoped, similar efforts in Denver appear to have been more successful. In some cases, finding ways to get educators or school leaders to work together on instructional strategies can provide an essential trust-building platform for more productive cooperation projects in the future.

# Cooperation Succeeds or Fails Based on Commitment, Structure, and Accountability

As shown earlier in this report, successful cooperation can take many forms: focusing on systems to improve special education services for students, better information systems for families, peer learning networks, co-locations of charter and district schools, shared central services, fairer funding formulas, and joint advocacy efforts. But even if cooperation efforts target high payoff topics, success depends heavily on committed and structured implementation.

## Successful Elements of Cooperation

In our observations, we have seen that successful cooperation efforts have most of these elements in common:

### Specific Shared Objectives and Accountability for Progress

Cooperation takes time. It is messy. If not managed effectively, cooperation can easily result in nothing more than a series of meetings. All successful partnerships to date have anticipated that problem and managed it by starting with a clear sense of the desired outcomes. Whether the goal was “more effective Common Core implementation across schools,” or “more high-quality seats and equitable access to them,” successful partnerships kept the goals at the forefront and explicitly tracked progress toward achieving them through proactive management processes and detailed documents.

***Successful efforts have balanced the sometimes-ambitious goals with realistic expectations about how quickly they could be realized, given fraught political environments and tactics.***

Successful efforts have balanced the sometimes-ambitious goals with realistic expectations about how quickly they could be realized, given fraught political environments and tactics. In Chicago, which arguably has the nation’s most contentious education politics, the broadly supported local teachers union has a strong anti-charter stance and pressures the mayor and district to treat charter schools as a threat to public education in the city. When headline-grabbing battles over school closures and teacher strikes threatened to derail collaborative work, district and charter leaders’

commitment to tangible targets for cooperation helped keep the work on track. Despite polarizing politics, the Compact parties managed to produce a cross-sector school performance framework, a revamped process for charter application, shared professional development, and a joint personalized learning project.

Compact Blue, the Denver committee charged with defining collaborative work and supporting its implementation, regularly discusses priorities and capacity. Priority issues have included charter use of district facilities, higher-quality and more equitable special education services (including above-

referenced center programs), and sharing levy dollars. The city's ability to focus on a few key areas has led to several critical improvements for schools and families, including a common accountability system that holds all public schools to the same standards and gives parents the school performance information they need to make informed choices.

## Leadership That Artfully Manages Commonalities and Differences

Even the best-intended cooperation efforts can easily go sideways: managing the diverse interests of charter and district actors can be like herding cats.<sup>25</sup> In Denver, leaders continually remind the parties of their common purpose. The city's cooperation focuses on how the district and charter school systems complement one another and how working together can produce benefits for families.

*Even the best-intended cooperation efforts can easily go sideways: managing the diverse interests of charter and district actors can be like herding cats.*

In Texas, when the Spring Branch superintendent invited charter operators to open and run schools within the district, central office staff and district school staff and faculty understandably pushed back. Charter operators, for their part, were also wary of risk to their autonomy. But the superintendent skillfully worked to allay fears on all sides as the parties developed trust. The district hired charter leaders for high-level district positions, helping to solidify charter sector trust and proving its commitment to ensuring charter school needs were understood and respected.

These uniquely positioned leaders, which CRPE calls “boundary spanners,” have proven adept at finding common ground and have negotiated cooperation initiatives in cities like Denver, Atlanta, Spokane, and Washington, D.C.<sup>26</sup> Today, in Spring Branch's co-located schools, boundary spanners continue to hone how district and charter schools share data and solve problems.

In Central Falls, Rhode Island, cooperation has focused not on the entire charter sector, but rather on tailored partnerships with individual schools and organizations that share goals. Multiple collaborative efforts continue to thrive despite district leadership turnover.

## Valuing Outcomes Over Institutions

In cities closest to *Embedded* cooperation, partnerships go beyond self-interest and become a means to a shared end. District leaders committed to outcomes over labels see their job as ensuring all students in a city are well served in public schools. Charter leaders committed to the same principle see their job as giving the most students as possible access to a high-quality education as quickly as possible. Without these driving philosophies, cooperation becomes a one-off exercise whose success rests in the hands of a relative few.

## Reasons Cooperation Efforts Fail

Unfortunately, examples of failed cooperation efforts are more common than the successes. Anyone contemplating such partnerships must understand the reasons for those failures, many of which stem from these elements:

### Side Project Mentality

If cooperation is just an add-on that lacks a central purpose and support, it gets lost among other initiatives or priorities. In cities like Los Angeles, Sacramento, and Hartford we have seen how leadership turnover, lack of commitment, and district staff resistance can derail even the least controversial cooperation. In Sacramento, then-superintendent Jonathan Raymond championed a broad vision for cooperation. But when he and most of his cabinet left, the school board chose to

focus on other efforts; the promising work on a common school performance framework became just another compliance-driven activity to meet a grant-specified deliverable. Sacramento-area charter schools still regularly communicate with each other and the district on charter renewals and school facilities policies, but the energy and urgency to jointly tackle big issues is gone.

## **Environment of Mistrust**

In cities like Austin (Texas), Sacramento (California), and Rochester (New York), cooperation suffered from toxic community politics and ingrained distrust could not be overcome. Los Angeles, where some 20 percent of public school students are in charter schools, shows how moving to transactional cooperation without tending to underlying trust issues can create partnerships that cannot weather leadership transitions. The biggest cooperation win in Los Angeles was a district-created funding mechanism to support more autonomy for charter schools around special education services: the charter schools saw this as a critical lifeline that let them improve services for students with disabilities.<sup>27</sup>

But when Aspire, a high-performing charter operator, decided they wanted to continue working with a regional entity on special education outside of the Los Angeles Unified School District, the school board reacted by refusing to renew the charter of several of the operator's schools. Ultimately, the board's high-profile action was widely seen as self-defeating since the successful charter operator simply appealed the decision and was granted a charter by the county.<sup>28</sup>

In Philadelphia, attempts to adopt a common school enrollment system failed in part due to lack of trust. Several prominent community leaders were suspicious because conversations about the proposed system were held behind closed doors. Many charter leaders did not trust that the district would be able to manage the system. District officials, for their part, were caught off guard and unable to allay fears.

## **Unequal Power**

Many districts interact with charter schools in their role as authorizer, which gives them unilateral power over the charter schools. In Baltimore, elements of district-charter governance were seen by charter leaders as limiting charter school autonomy (and power) in the city. Under state law, the local district is the only authorizer for all charter schools in Baltimore and is responsible for hiring and dismissal decisions for charter school principals. Charter school teachers, like their district counterparts, must collectively bargain with the district. In 2010, then-district CEO Andres Alonso signed the Compact with the goal of increasing financial and programmatic autonomy across both district and charter schools. Baltimore made some progress—most notably on a jointly developed school performance framework and in a revamped charter renewal process seen by many charter leader as imperfect, but a clear improvement. But the power imbalance (and Alonso's departure) ultimately choked off the potential for deeper cooperation.

Urban districts once enjoyed a monopoly over public education in their communities; in some cities this is still true. But even when it is not, districts sometimes still operate as if it were true. Cooperation requires listening to multiple voices and seeking compromise and accommodation where necessary. The New York City Schools chancellor is appointed by the mayor. The current mayor, Bill de Blasio, chose Carmen Fariña, who has operated with a more centralized vision for running schools than her predecessor, leaving less room for collaborative decision making. Both de Blasio and Fariña are also widely seen as skeptical of charter schools. The net result has relegated district-charter engagement to efforts where substantive policy decisions are off the table.

## Tone-Deafness

Many potential collaborators fail to understand that they are dealing with a diverse set of partners. Although charter schools are often talked about as a monolithic bloc assumed to hold common

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interests, school-by-school variations are vast. A charter may operate as an independent or stand-alone school. Or, it may be part of a network or CMO. Some charter schools target special student populations; others operate much like a traditional district school, serving a surrounding neighborhood. Some charter schools are based on certain instructional models or hold particular educational philosophies. This differentiation may be encouraged in cities who seek to serve the diverse needs of children and give families choices. But it can make cooperation a more complex negotiation than, for example, a transportation contract or even a collective-bargaining agreement with teachers. Cooperation agreements can be exclusive, leaving some charter

schools behind. Or they can be too inclusive and try to be all things to all people, becoming diluted to the point where goals are intangible or no realistic path for implementation exists.

Without good planning, broad commitment, and strong leadership, time can be wasted on ineffective partnerships and already-fragile relationships can sour. But the alternatives—continued isolated actions like one-size-fits-all state regulation, top-down district directives, or no action at all—are worse.

Cooperation is not always possible or productive. But it is usually best for districts, charter schools, and families to try to work jointly on some things even while competing on others. The central question for potential collaborators, then, is not whether to work together, but rather when, around what issues, and with what goals? The following section will help inform those decisions.

# Recommendations for District and Charter Leaders, States, and Funders to Realize the Opportunities of Cooperation

The increasing number of successful district-charter partnerships generally stem from clear-eyed pragmatism and a recognition that:

- Time invested in the hard work successful cooperation demands is not time wasted, but ignoring opportunities to serve students more effectively most certainly is.
- Public education’s core mission is not about gaining or preserving market share but about meeting the needs of all students by whatever means possible.

By identifying ways to level the playing field for fair school competition, by developing common strategies to make parents’ school choice experience more user-friendly and fair, and by looking for opportunities to leverage complementary organizational assets and advantages for greater impact on students and classrooms, the sum will indeed be greater than the parts of sector-specific education reforms.

***Like it or not, traditional school systems in most major cities operate in a highly competitive environment because of the rise of public charter schools. Districts that continue to ignore or fight competition are likely to see their already severe financial consequences worsen.***

Like it or not, traditional school systems in most major cities operate in a highly competitive environment because of the rise of public charter schools. In truth, many urban settings have seen enrollment declines in traditional public schools for decades, thanks to families with the requisite savvy or economic means decamping to private schools or neighboring suburban districts—a factor most school districts have ignored. Districts that continue to ignore or fight competition are likely to see their already severe financial consequences worsen.

That said, school choice advocates who believe charter school expansion can continue in a bubble, entirely isolated from these increasingly dire district realities, are kidding themselves—even with a new, strongly pro-school choice federal administration taking power. The political backlash to operating as lone wolves without regard to the impact on students who remain in struggling district schools is growing fast. News coverage in “high-choice” cities in recent years has focused on school closures, uneven special education enrollments, harsh student suspension and expulsion policies, growing community anger over chronically poor school options in certain neighborhoods, and fights to get into high-quality schools in others. With a new president who talked on the campaign trail of little else besides school choice, charter schools are at risk of being

seen as a conservative, partisan project that feeds the “end of public education” narrative. To combat this—and make sure choice works for all families—choice leaders must insist on policies and practices that promote quality, equity, accountability, and collaborative district-charter problem solving.

Both sectors fail to engage on these issues at their own peril. Charter schools will not continue to grow apace without access to the funding or facilities that districts control. Districts will not be able to use charter schools’ flexibilities to their advantage and stabilize enrollment losses without substantive partnerships with those charter schools. And families will continue to pay the price for isolated, self-interested action.

Carving a new path will require hard work. Compelling 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.

## What district and charter leaders can do to support successful cooperation

- **Recognize mutual interests, and help others do the same.** Cooperation is strongest when district and charter school leaders understand that they each have a vested interest in the other’s success. Leaders must help others see the light. Do not expect central office staff to suddenly become charter-friendly or for charter school advocates to suddenly see districts as anything other than a barrier. In toxic environments, spend time building trust and goodwill between sectors and celebrate early wins to sustain motivation for future work. Recognizing their mutual interests, district and charter leaders worked together to secure state passage of the Cleveland Plan—which set a common vision for education in the city—and voter approval of a subsequent property tax levy that benefits both sectors. Now these leaders are finding ways to deepen cooperation.
- **Build a strong coalition for a citywide approach to education.** Cooperation is less likely to survive over time if just a few leaders in the district or charter sectors support it. Include everyone who wants to see the city succeed. Boston broadened the tent by bringing in Catholic schools and the mayor’s deputy for education. School leaders can help advocacy groups understand cooperation’s goals and merits and how they can support the work citywide. While many groups have focused on advocating for state-level legislative action, supporting cooperation is more nuanced than rallying support for an up or down state vote. But groups that traditionally promote charter schools could provide critical help when, for example, a Compact or contract comes before a school board or a collaborative superintendent seeks reappointment.
- **Find and use boundary spanners.** People with experience in both sectors, or who are willing to switch from one to the other, carry authority that helps them bridge diverse interests and negotiate effectively. As shown in cities or districts such as Denver, Spring Branch Independent School District, and Washington, D.C., a boundary spanner can infuse district or citywide strategy with innovative ideas, see both sectors’ perspectives in the gray area of contentious issues, and help gain trust and facilitate cooperation without being seen as beholden to one sector.

- **Focus on issues that will lead to clear accomplishments.** Identify tangible, concrete goals that benefit both district and charter schools, as Chicago did in its Compact. Choose cooperation activities that fit leaders' desired cost benefit, as shown in Figure 7, to maximize results. Wins build support for more complex work as the relationship matures.
- **Make “trades” that give each party a win.** Hard-nosed bargaining need not diminish the altruism that drives many in education. Leaders should come to the table ready to deal: partnership needs to deliver clear benefits for each party. In San Jose, California, the Franklin-McKinley School District wanted to ensure that its growing number of charter schools enrolled an equitable share of special education students. Cooperation negotiations resulted in the district offering facilities the charter schools needed and the charter schools working with the district on enrollment fairs and other initiatives to help special education families learn about the charter school options available to them.
- **Develop focused partnerships, but do not stop there.** Cooperation in places like Spring Branch and Central Falls began with a relatively narrow scope, focusing on limited partnerships between individual schools or groups of schools to achieve specific purposes. These one-off efforts can produce concrete early wins, but leaders should use these successes as a springboard for broader cooperation. Commit to it as an ongoing, long-term endeavor, addressing issues with partners as they arise, rather than approaching cooperation as a single, discrete project.
- **Consider creating a dedicated governance entity for cooperation.** Boston, Denver, and Cleveland have seen continued success as the result of dedicated cooperation committees whose sole mission is to support joint work with clear meeting structures, timelines, and accountability for broad participation and progress in the initiatives. Neither the charter sector nor the district is treated as a monolith; the committees work to ensure that all charter schools can participate in at least one initiative and that multiple district departments are involved. A third-party or independent facilitator often supports the work and ensures all voices are heard.

But even the most serious-minded, savvy commitments are at risk without policy and political support. Outside prodding and accountability are needed to maintain momentum and provide political cover for local leaders pursuing a change to the status quo.

## What states can do to support cooperation

As a previous report on district-charter collaboration describes in depth, the state has a largely unexplored, but potentially important, role to play in supporting city-level cooperation.

At the very least, states should *create greater transparency* around data for all schools (enrollment, discipline, etc.). Verifying and auditing charter school data can go a long way toward solving tough equity issues while infringing least on autonomy and being relatively inexpensive to do. To date, states have not done very much of this.

To encourage districts and charter schools to partner, states can take these first steps:

- **Provide political cover and support.** Governors or state school chiefs can use their informal power to support cooperation by building coalitions, connecting interested parties to cooperation efforts, and publicizing innovations and successes that stem from cooperation both locally and beyond.
- **Use funding to incentivize cooperation.** State-administered competitive grants can promote district-charter collaborative projects. States could also modify or eliminate barriers in state funding formulas that get in the way of cooperation.

- **Promote cooperation through new accountability systems.** States can develop their new, more local accountability systems under the Every Student Succeeds Act with an eye to leveling the playing field between district and charter schools through moves like supporting [citywide accountability metrics](#).
- **Support strong charter authorizing practices.** Charter school quality is critical to the success of district-charter cooperation: weak authorizing practices lead to low-quality schools, leaving districts with little incentive to establish cross-sector partnerships. Poor authorizing and low-quality charter schools also promotes skepticism and distrust of CMOs and the charter sector in general on the part of district staff, teachers, and community members. States can fund improvements to authorizers or help local authorizers institutionalize best practices through technical assistance, whether directly or through organizations like the [National Association of Charter School Authorizers](#).

While the first steps listed above would certainly support local cooperation efforts like those described in this report, states can advance cooperation on a larger scale. States can help families by creating solutions to pressing challenges around choice and school quality by reworking systems so that cities can function as an integrated “system of schools” rather than as hosts to two separate sectors. Retooling the entire education system to be collaborative by design can prevent lost progress on areas of key importance to students and families—losses that stem from the political challenges and leadership turnover that so often dog district-charter cooperation efforts.

To “go big” on cooperation, states can:

- **Focus on family-friendly solutions.** Families across the country face challenges navigating enrollment systems, finding more than one school choice that offers a good fit, and securing transportation. While all these are ample areas for cooperation on their own, they would receive more attention if a state were to specifically mandate or track cities’ progress in these areas, providing technical assistance where necessary.
- **Develop systems that move beyond the district-charter dichotomy.** CRPE colleagues Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim argue for a new education governance model in [A Democratic Constitution for Public Education](#). With a limited, but critical, mandate to approve an annual slate of schools, a city education commission would support a truly citywide system of autonomous public schools. The distinction between district and charter schools would matter little, but cooperation between schools could be vital to ensuring school quality in every neighborhood. Similarly, for cities with fragmented K–12 governance, coordinating practices such as enrollment policies on a citywide scale would benefit families and charter schools, and could provide more fertile ground and a more rational basis for cooperation.

## What funders can do to support successful cooperation

Funders can play a major role in fostering cross-sector collaborative practices in cities. As the Gates Foundation-funded District-Charter Collaboration Compacts demonstrate, foundations can provide the resources that incentivize cities, districts, and charter school leaders to come together. But to effectively move forward, funders should learn from the Compact process and cities’ experiences in developing them.

Key lessons in supporting cooperation include:

- **Let cities define and focus on what they need.** While some collaborative efforts are more cost- and time-effective than others, foundations should encourage cities to collaborate on the issues that matter most to their own families and schools. “Big-ticket” cooperation projects like common enrollment are laudable long-term goals for any city. But a city may have more

pressing areas needing cooperation, such as special education funding and services, or accountability for student discipline practices. Enabling a city to address its specific needs can build a strong basis for future “big-ticket” work. Foundations should support the work that cities want and need to focus on.

- **Support cooperation as an ongoing effort.** The development and signing of Compact agreements garnered much fanfare. Such attention can help create momentum and temporarily cool contention between the sectors. But if agreements are not seen as living documents, as an integral part of a city’s long-term cooperation plan and philosophy, or as part of a governance system that supports continued progress and accountability (governance like the [Boston Compact Steering Committee](#) or accountability provisions like those in [Chicago’s Compact](#)), these efforts can stall out. Foundations should create incentives for ongoing work, rather than efforts tied to time-limited grant periods.
- **Invest in community engagement and plan for political cover.** Strong, thoughtful leadership has shown to be key for pushing cooperation forward. But when leadership turns over, that work can come to a halt. Foundations looking to support long-term cooperation should invest in helping cities build broad community understanding of and support for cross-sector cooperation, so progress can survive beyond the tenure of a forward-thinking superintendent or mayor. Foundations can also help cities proactively plan for and respond to political challenges and pushback that can come along with cooperation-generated changes to the status quo.

## Conclusion: What's Next for District-Charter Cooperation?

Leaders in cities with multiple public school choice options increasingly realize that engagement between school districts and charter schools is necessary. While our recommendations in this report are designed to help make the relationship collaborative and productive, much remains to be learned about how to increase the reach and impact of joint work.

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) will continue to spotlight and track ongoing efforts or promising new agreements. Our next round of research will pay special attention to:

- Constraints and opportunities on facilities sharing
- Ways states can best support local cooperation
- Effective strategies for managing the politics of cooperation
- Promising methods to replicate high-quality district and charter models

District-charter cooperation is an opportunity—and in most cities with sizeable charter school student populations, a requirement—to most effectively meet children's educational needs. The cooperation concept is most prominent in the 23 cities that signed the Gates Foundation-supported district-charter Compacts. The 2011 announcement of the original 16 agreements served as a refreshing counter-example to the “you're either with us or against us” view dominating education politics in so many cities. That said, the relationship between district and charter schools predates the formalized Compacts and can take many forms. The central question remains how best to make that relationship effective and help it rise to the level of partnership.

Many cities, Compact and otherwise, offer successful examples of cooperation undergirded by several common elements. Successful cooperation requires a sober accounting of each side's strengths and weaknesses. It requires agreements that are specific and have reachable goals with give-and-take benefits for all parties. The strongest agreements map a clear governing structure to foster ongoing, long-term work and hold all parties accountable for progress, guided by a broad vision for the city's education landscape that spans more than one grant period or election cycle. City leaders, states, and foundations can help provide the political and financial support that sustains these agreements and can help carve a path toward cooperative problem solving and coordination among school providers, including districts in cities where thousands of students still attend traditional public schools.

***All parties need to work harder to ensure cooperation is not treated as just a hypothetical good idea, but as tangible, worthwhile work that pays real dividends for the broadest possible spectrum of schools, students, and families.***

Cooperation can serve as the glue that binds cities as their education landscapes shift—shifts like those already under way in cities where school autonomy and choices for families are integral parts of a revamped public education system. Leaders can strengthen that glue by ensuring that choice is accompanied by carefully considered government oversight and supports for quality, accountability, and equity—not simply left to the whims of free-market forces. Looking ahead, school boards, central offices, and even charter school networks will evolve and could look quite different in 50 years. Students’ needs will change and diversify, even as closing the opportunity gap remains a challenge. This changing landscape will generate more questions around how to best educate

children. We remain convinced that district-charter cooperation can help produce answers. But to get those answers, all parties need to work harder to ensure cooperation is not treated as just a hypothetical good idea, but as tangible, worthwhile work that pays real dividends for the broadest possible spectrum of schools, students, and families.

# Endnotes

- 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.
- 2 The City of Central Falls exited bankruptcy after 13 months, in 2012. See Jess Bidgood, “Plan to End Bankruptcy in Rhode Island City Gains Approval,” *New York Times*, September 6, 2012.
- 3 Joe Nocera, “The Central Falls Success,” *New York Times*, January 2, 2012.
- 4 Michael Vaughn, “Coffee Break: Denver’s Tom Boasberg on Leadership, Equity and...Cuneiform,” *Education Post*, January 6, 2016.
- 5 Christina Tuttle, et al., *Understanding District-Charter Collaboration Grants* (Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2016), 25.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ashley Jochim, et al., *How Parents Experience Public School Choice* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2014).
- 8 School quality “grades” given by the Excellent Schools Detroit, a nonprofit that ranks school quality and publishes school performance data. For their methodology, see *School Quality Scorecard*, Excellent Schools Detroit website.
- 9 Michael DeArmond, Ashley Jochim, and Robin Lake, *Making School Choice Work* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2014).
- 10 Betheny Gross, Michael DeArmond, and Patrick Denice, *Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice: Early Evidence from Denver and New Orleans* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015); Steven Glazerman and Dallas Dotter, *Market Signals: Evidence on the Determinants and Consequences of School Choice from a Citywide Lottery*, Working Paper 45 (Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2016); Douglas N. Harris and Matthew F. Larsen, *What Schools Do Families Want (And Why)? New Orleans Families and Their School Choices Before and after Katrina* (New Orleans, LA: Education Research Alliance, 2015).
- 11 Marcus Winters, *Why the Gap? Special Education and New York City Charter Schools* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2013).
- 12 Patrick Denice, Betheny Gross, and Karega Rausch, *Understanding Student Discipline Practices in Charter Schools: A Research Agenda* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015); Betheny Gross, Sivan Tuchman, and Sarah Yatko, *Grappling with Discipline in Autonomous Schools: New Approaches from D.C. and New Orleans* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).
- 13 Paul Hill and Tricia Maas, *Backfill in Charter High Schools: Practices to Learn From and Questions to be Answered* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).
- 14 See CRPE’s 2015 city summaries for *Los Angeles*, *Denver*, and *New Orleans* for more information on their work to distribute resources to serve special education students more fairly in charter schools. Los Angeles reorganized their Special Education Local Plan Area to provide more autonomy for charter schools. Denver developed “center programs” for charter schools to serve special needs students. New Orleans, through the Recovery School District, developed a system to share catastrophic costs and align special education funding with student needs. Also see Lynn Schnaiberg and Robin Lake, *Special Education in New Orleans: Juggling Flexibility, Reinvention, and Accountability in the Nation’s Most Decentralized School System* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015).
- 15 For more on co-location, see Michael DeArmond, et al., *The Best of Both Worlds: Can District-Charter Co-Location Be a Win-Win?* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015).

- 16 One lesson from Franklin-McKinley is that good fences make good neighbors. Schools share district properties, but have their own identifiable spaces, including school entrances and child drop-off areas.
- 17 Gross, Tuchman, and Yatsko, [\*Grappling with Discipline in Autonomous Schools\*](#), 7.
- 18 Ibid, 15.
- 19 Schnaiberg and Lake, [\*Special Education in New Orleans\*](#).
- 20 Jaclyn Zubrzycki, “DPS Shifting More Special Education Duties to Charter Schools,” *Chalkbeat*, April 30, 2015.
- 21 Josh Drake and Robin Lake, [\*How District and Charter Schools Coordinate Supports for Students with Special Needs\*](#), webinar (Denver, CO: Denver Public Schools, May 2012).
- 22 Gross, DeArmond, Denice, [\*Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice\*](#); Glazerman and Dotter, [\*Market Signals\*](#); Harris and Larsen, [\*What Schools Do Families Want \(And Why\)?\*](#)
- 23 Yatsko, et al., [\*Apples to Apples: Common School Performance Frameworks as a Tool for Choice and Accountability\*](#) (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).
- 24 Ashley Jochim, [\*Measures of Last Resort: Assessing Strategies for State-Initiated Turnarounds\*](#) (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).
- 25 Sean Gill, Sarah Yatkso, and Robin Lake, [\*Herding Cats: Managing Diverse Charter School Interests in Cooperation Efforts\*](#) (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).
- 26 For more on boundary spanners, see Sarah Yatsko and Angela Bruns, [\*The Best of Both Worlds: School District-Charter Sector Boundary Spanners\*](#) (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015).
- 27 In California, special education is provided through regional Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA), which can include multiple districts and charter schools. Many charter schools in the state use the SELPA based in El Dorado County, even though they are not located there. For more information, see [\*What Is a SELPA?\*](#), California Charter Schools Association, accessed December 28, 2016.
- 28 For more on LA County’s SELPA and the decision not to renew Aspire public schools charter, see Robin Lake, “Shortsighted Board Action in L. A.,” *The Lens* (blog), Center on Reinventing Public Education, February 14, 2014.