

Lessons Learned About District-Charter Partnerships: How Sharing Instructional Practices Can Pave the Way for More Collaboration

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Charter public schools began as the “research and development” alternative to traditional public schools over 20 years ago, but today they account for significant portions of student enrollment in many cities. In more than 190 districts across the country, charter school attendance makes up at least 10 percent of public school student enrollment, and in 17 districts, over 30 percent of public school students attend charter schools.¹ As charter enrollment grows, the consequence of traditional districts and charter sectors operating in isolation or—more commonly—with hostility and distrust, falls squarely on the shoulders of students and families, who fall victim to byzantine enrollment systems and timelines, a lack of accountability around equity issues like discipline or special education, inequitable funding, or missed opportunities for schools and educators to share their best thinking, strategies, and practices. Increasingly, however, cities have chosen to forge partnerships to address these common challenges.

This brief describes the landscape of district-charter collaboration and the evidence to date, based on a [recent CRPE study](#), on the potential and limitations of one strategy that many cities have used to develop more collaborative relationships: sharing instructional practices across district and charter schools.

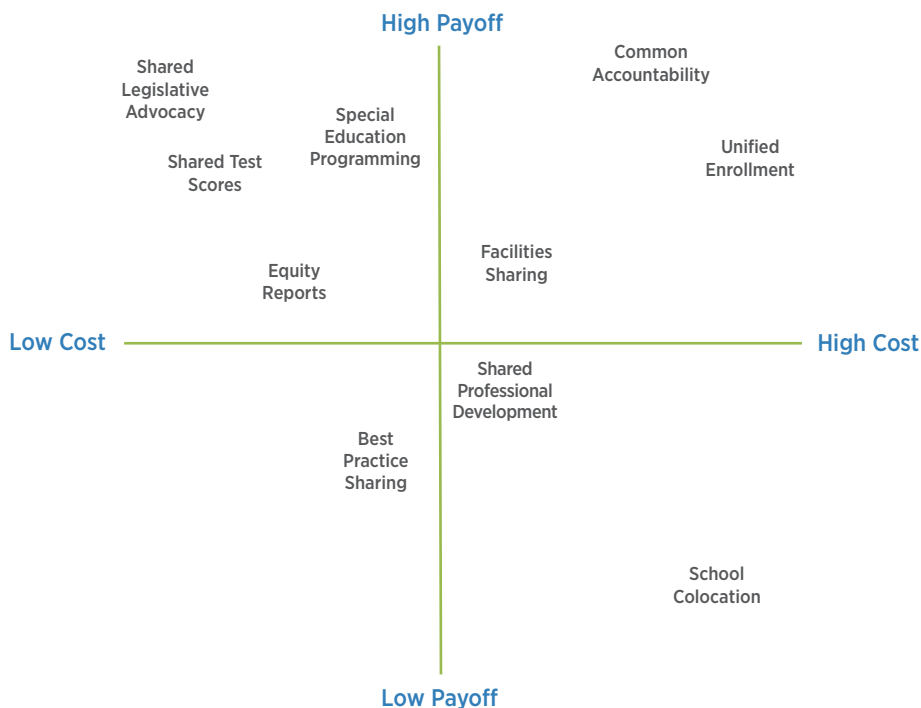
Since 2011 CRPE has studied and provided technical assistance to 23 cities that formalized cross-sector partnerships through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-funded District-Charter Collaboration Compacts (see table 1), as well as to several cities pursuing collaborative work outside of formal “Compacts.”² These Compacts were originally intended to foster innovation and collaboration to provide students with quality educational options, with the end goal of increased college readiness.³ But cities pursued a variety of different initiatives as part of this longer-term goal. Compact agreements typically included goals around establishing equitable funding and resources for charter schools, pushing for replication or expansion of high-quality school options in highest-need areas, and creating transparency and equitable systems for serving students with special needs. However, they also often included specific goals like creating [unified enrollment](#) and [common accountability systems](#), or developing economies of scale through shared services contracts.⁴

TABLE 1. Cities That Signed District-Charter Collaboration Compacts

In 2010	In 2011	In 2013	In 2014	In 2015
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baltimore, MD Denver, CO Hartford, CT Los Angeles, CA Minneapolis, MN Nashville, TN Recovery School District, New Orleans, LA New York City, NY 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Austin, TX Boston, MA Central Falls, RI Chicago, IL Philadelphia, PA Sacramento, CA Spring Branch, TX 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aldine, TX Franklin-McKinley, San Jose, CA Lawrence, MA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spokane, WA Tulsa, OK 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cleveland, OH Grand Prairie, TX Indianapolis, IN

While all cities started with ambitious goals and goodwill, we observed that not all collaborative efforts were created equal. Some strategies, such as unified enrollment and common accountability systems, are crucial in high-choice systems, but take an immense amount of time, resources, and trust to build, whereas shared advocacy around common concerns or data sharing require less effort and investment, but can still yield tangible results. See figure 1 for how CRPE has categorized the continuum of costs to implement collaboration versus potential benefits to the district and charter sectors and/or families and students.

FIGURE 1. Costs and Benefits of Different Types of Collaboration⁵



While understanding the typical cost versus benefit of different initiatives is an important step for cities considering how they should collaborate, it is not the only consideration. Cities can also understand how their context makes success more or less likely. For example, the potential impact on families of a systemwide change to streamline enrollment information and processes is significant, and while the costs of implementation are high, some cities have the conditions that make success easier to come by.⁶ From our research, we have found that the following conditions enable success:⁷

- Leaders willing to champion the cause.
- A win-win: something to benefit both sides.
- Benefits for the effort outweigh the costs.
- A plan for sustainability.
- Governance to push the effort forward.
- A way to measure effectiveness.
- Funding available to support the effort.

Some of these factors, such as a leader's will to champion the cause and governance to push the effort forward, take time and effort to develop. Others, such as a plan for sustainability and creating a "win-win," are part of smart political strategy and careful management. But none of these factors are static: leaders who prioritize this work can take steps to develop these conditions to build more productive cross-sector relationships and initiatives.

Shared Instructional Practices Can Build Goodwill, But Take Work

One strategy that cities have used to build goodwill and trust—and to establish a proof point for further work—is to start small, with "low-cost" collaboration. Of the original group of cities that signed Compacts, 14 committed to share instructional practices, and many cities outside of this group have engaged in this work as well.⁸ But despite being relatively lower cost, there is no guarantee of success. Prior observation of instructional practice-sharing efforts in Compact cities found that these efforts, while usually fairly simple to get off the ground, rarely resulted in measurable outcomes and often became bogged down in shifting priorities, political winds, and leadership change. Because the benefits of shared instructional practices are challenging to quantify, they are often not given the time and resources needed to fully realize benefits.⁹ Moreover, while easier to set up in comparison to other activities, it still requires time, effort, and existing relationships to start. In environments with scarce resources, high levels of distrust, or where negative perceptions about the other school or sector prevail (whether accurate or not), collaboration—even small overtures—may not be the highest priority for school or education system leaders.

However, a [CRPE study](#) reveals several promising and well-developed shared instructional practice programs that are building cross-sector trust and showing early positive academic outcomes. While not always the highest-impact activity compared to other collaborative efforts, cross-sector practice-sharing can not only set the tone for future work, it can restore an original purpose of charter schools as laboratories of innovation. From a scan of efforts across all cities that CRPE studies, three main categories of instructional practice-sharing emerged:

- **Purposeful colocation:** Designing shared cross-sector buildings or taking advantage of existing colocated schools to facilitate practice-sharing between teachers at both schools. The [SKY Partnership](#) in Spring Branch, Texas, is a great example of this approach that includes traditional district, KIPP, and Yes Prep schools collaborating in an effort to improve student outcomes.
- **Residency or fellowship programs:** Programs designed to provide teachers or school leaders with ongoing professional development and skill building. These may be run by a district or charter organization, or an external organization. These programs have the added advantage of supporting talent pipelines. Achievement First's [residency program](#) in Hartford, Connecticut, and the [Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders](#) are examples of these ongoing efforts for educators to learn together.
- **Shared professional development:** The most common type of cross-sector practice-sharing. These initiatives can range from inviting charter school teachers to participate in district professional development opportunities, to long-term programs such as The Summit Learning Program, Uncommon Schools' [Impact program](#), and the [Boston Educators Collaborative](#) (all described in this [CRPE report](#)).¹⁰

Challenges and Opportunities with Sharing Instructional Practices

In the cities CRPE studied, several patterns of common challenges and factors for success emerged.

First, nearly every city had difficulty expanding their cross-sector partnerships beyond a set of more enthusiastic, early volunteers. Mistrust and skepticism of the other sector (i.e., charter teachers' skepticism of district teachers and vice versa) is often still dominant outside the smaller circles of actors ready to jump on board. Especially without easily measurable outcomes, leaders anticipate that growing these practice-sharing programs to include cross-sector skeptics will be a challenge.

Second, piecemeal implementation of strategies may not be effective. Practices that a successful district or a charter school use may not always produce successful outcomes when transplanted into another school without the broader culture or schoolwide support for the strategy. For example, while teachers may be eager to try new classroom-based strategies learned at a collaborative professional development session, they may encounter a lack of necessary school-level supports to implement them with fidelity.

Similarly, systemic and logistical barriers can thwart successful adoption of strategies. For example, collective bargaining agreements, district accountability systems, or simply a lack of collected knowledge or ability to demonstrate the approaches that other teachers and leaders want to learn from can be significant barriers to executing new practices. Such challenges highlight the need for leadership beyond participating teachers or principals to champion these sharing efforts and help clear hurdles that arise.

Given these challenges, our study identified several factors for better chances of successfully sharing instructional practices. First, leaders developing these programs must be sensitive and responsive to local needs and context. To create a higher cost-benefit ratio, leaders should work to identify what potential participating schools most need and are interested in—whether that's early literacy strategies, support with implementing personalization strategies, or development of special education expertise. Leaders must also be cognizant of the political dynamics at play and build in the necessary time for trust- and relationship-building as the programs begin.

Second, leaders who share practices should be clear on what other structures or factors must be in place to support successful adoption and avoid ineffective implementation. Whether or not the programs insist that participants adopt strategies wholesale, leaders must be clear about what pieces are necessary to make a strategy work.

Finally, leaders who develop shared instructional practice programs should take time to cultivate support and commitment from the charter and district sectors and other organizations needed. Efforts to share instructional practices, as with any collaborative work, live and die on relationships. This work is time intensive—without support, it is vulnerable to shifting priorities or politics. It is crucial to have leaders on board to champion the efforts and provide resources and support to make implementation possible.

Conclusion

Done well, sharing instructional practices across district and charter sectors provides opportunity to disseminate innovation from successful and forward-thinking educators and schools to benefit more students, as well as to break down some of the mistrust and political baggage that so often is tied to the district-charter dynamic. However, while seemingly simple, education leaders looking to pursue such efforts must be careful to build strong foundations for successful and sustainable work. While many of these partnerships are still early and evolving, we hope that our research provides practitioners and policymakers the information they need to consider various approaches and a framework for understanding the factors underpinning successful cross-sector efforts.

Additional Resources

Learn more about these areas of district-charter collaboration:

Common accountability systems:

Apples to Apples: Common School Performance Frameworks as a Tool for Choice and Accountability

Unified enrollment:

A Guide to Unifying Enrollment: The What, Why, and How for Those Considering It

Politics of collaboration:

Collision Course: Embracing Politics to Succeed in District-Charter Collaboration

State role:

What States Can Do to Promote District-Charter Collaboration

Facilities:

Opening the Schoolhouse Door: Helping Charter Schools Access Space in District-Owned Facilities

New partnership school models:

Partnership Schools: New Governance Models for Creating Quality School Options in Districts

Colocation:

The Best of Both Worlds: Can District-Charter Co-Location Be a Win-Win?

Endnotes

1. *A Growing Movement: America's Largest Charter Public School Communities and Their Impact on Student Outcome* (Washington, DC: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, November 2016).
2. See CRPE's website for more on district-charter collaboration.
3. Sarah Yatsko, Elizabeth Cooley Nelson, and Robin Lake, *District Charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2013).
4. Ibid.
5. Robin Lake et al., *Bridging the District-Charter Divide to Help Students Succeed* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).
6. Ibid.
7. Sarah Yatsko, "Getting Smart About the Risks of District-Charter Collaboration," *School Administrator Magazine*, January 2018.
8. Yatsko et al., *District Charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report*.
9. Lake et al., *Bridging the District-Charter Divide*.
10. Tricia Maas and Robin Lake, *Passing Notes: Learning From Efforts to Share Instructional Practices Across District-Charter Lines* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).

About The Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S Department of Education.