



Hopes, Fears, & Reality

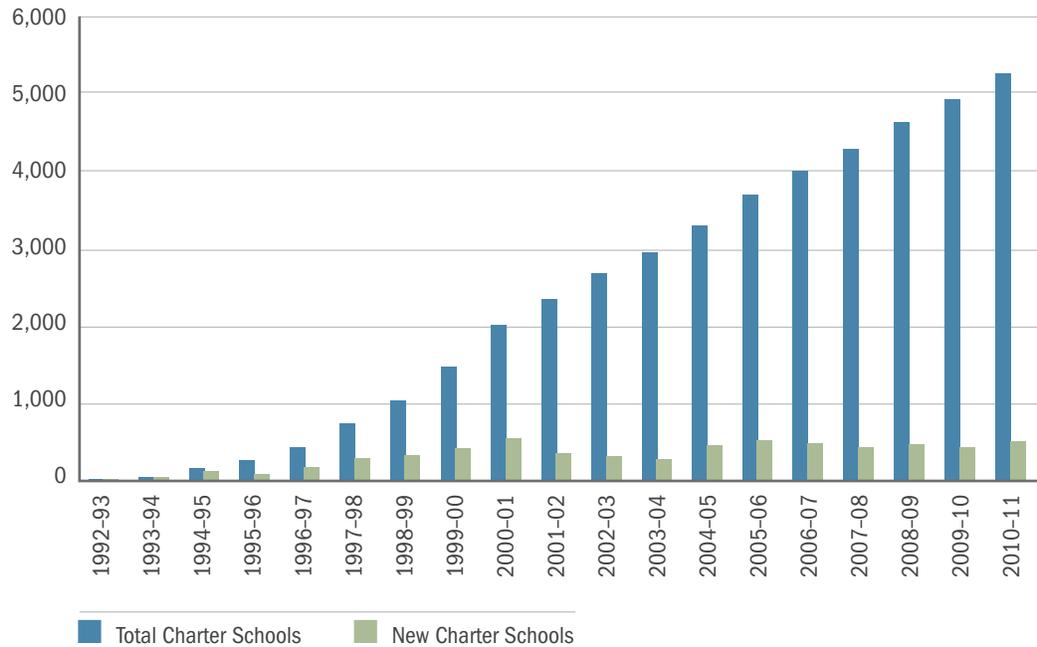
A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN CHARTER SCHOOLS IN 2011

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Fast Facts: Charter Schools in 2010–11



Number of charter schools in 2008-09:	4662	Number of charter schools in 2010-11:	5275
Percentage of public schools that are charter schools in 2008-09:	4.8%	Percentage of public schools that are charter schools in 2010-11:	5.4%
Percentage of all public school students attending charter schools in 2008-09:	2.9%	Percentage of all public school students attending charter schools in 2010-11:	3.7%
Number of states that <i>expanded</i> the allowable number of charter schools or charter school students since 2008-09:	16*	Number of states that adopted new rules that <i>restricted</i> the allowable number of charter schools or charter school students since 2008-09:	1*
Number of charter schools that opened in 2008-09:	487	Number of charter schools that opened in 2010-11:	519
Number of charter schools that closed in 2008-09:	143	Number of charter schools that closed in 2010-11:	152

*In 2010, Mississippi enacted a new charter law that expanded the number of conversion charter schools allowed (from 6 to 12) but restricted the types of schools that can convert to charter school status; therefore, Mississippi both expanded and restricted the allowable number of charter schools or charter school students.

All figures are from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools website. See <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/home> and <http://charterlaws.publiccharters.org/charterlaws>.

Overview

Consorting With the Enemy: When Charter Schools and School Districts Work Together

Robin J. Lake

More than 15 years ago, my colleagues Paul Hill, Dean Millot, and I wrote an article in *Education Week* titled “Charter Schools: Escape or Reform?” In the article, we explained that the charter school movement began as an escape valve for disaffected parents and community groups. In order for the movement to mature into a true reform force, we argued, charter schools would have to forge partnerships with school districts, finding ways to compromise and work together.

At the heart of our argument was a concept that Paul Hill promoted in his book, *Reinventing Public Education* (Hill, Pierce, & Guthrie, 1997). Hill suggested that school districts could be far more effective if they stopped trying to run all of their schools centrally and instead oversaw all schools as performance contracts, working with charter school and other providers to run schools for students the district was failing to serve. In this vision, the central office would have to shift its focus from primarily compliance to performance management and continuous improvement.

For many years after we wrote our op-ed, it looked as if school districts and charter schools might never come together in the ways we imagined. Nearly all school districts refused to even recognize that charter schools had a right to exist. Districts were known to call the local fire marshal to make sure new charter schools could not get their fire permits approved in time to open or to delay the release of state funds so that charter schools couldn’t pay salaries. Charter school leaders were just as antagonistic—waging aggressive legal, public relations, and political battles to win as many new charters as possible in historically low-performing districts such as Dayton, Ohio; Milwaukee; and Los Angeles.



With very few exceptions, charter schools and districts operated in isolation. Instead of the charter school movement creating a systemwide ripple effect, which was in fact the intention at the heart of the movement's originators, districts ignored or dismissed charter school innovations. Charter school advocates threatened to keep opening schools until districts went completely out of business.

Today, however, charter schools and districts are commonly finding themselves sitting down at the bargaining table to work out deals. This evolution has come, in part, simply because the charter school sector has matured and can now make a compelling case that it can help districts with quality schooling for at-risk students. But districts, too, have evolved. Urban school superintendents across the country are realizing that a centrally delivered, one-size-fits-all approach simply is not viable, and that they need partnerships to bring in entrepreneurial talent and mission-driven teams (Campbell, 2011; Hill, Menefee-Libey, Dusseault, DeArmond, & Gross, 2009; Lake & Hernandez, 2011). Together, districts and charter schools are working on some of the most difficult problems that choice creates in order to reap the deepest and most widespread promise that choice offers.

But moving away from antagonism and defiance and toward true collaboration and problem solving is not easy. To ensure that students with special needs are served equitably, will districts fall back on old compliance-based rules that have never served students well? For the sake of ease and efficiency, should charter schools accept students on a zoned neighborhood-school basis? Who represents the charter school community when the charter schools are making deals with school districts? These are difficult questions, but they are best resolved now, while such partnerships are nascent. This volume of *Hopes, Fears, & Reality* plows deeply into the political risks involved and the technical issues that need to be addressed and provides concrete examples of what charter–district collaboration looks like in the cities furthest out in front, all with an eye toward research and evidence.

EMERGING TRENDS

We begin, as we always do, with an overview of emerging trends in the charter school landscape. In Chapter 1, Betheny Gross and other analysts from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) provide new data showing that the charter

school sector is serving a growing share of minority and Hispanic students and that rural charter schools appear to be on the rise. While the movement's growth remains steady, less of that growth appears to be driven by charter school management organizations than it has in recent years. In line with this volume's theme, we also provide estimates of how many cities are actively partnering with charter schools.

WHY SHOULD DISTRICTS COLLABORATE?

CRPE's Parker Baxter, who formerly ran the charter division of Denver Public Schools, contributed Chapter 2. Baxter examines the factors that are driving districts to collaborate with charter schools, what those collaborations look like, and what kind of political landmines both sides must deal with. Baxter discusses the current trend toward portfolio districts and efforts to develop charter–district compacts. He argues that, by sharing resources and building trust with charter schools, districts gain tremendous leverage to demand greater equity and accountability. Districts have historically viewed charter schools as liabilities, so by building these relationships, forward-thinking urban superintendents risk angering local teachers unions and losing board support. But the superintendents are building the relationships anyway, in hopes of turning charter schools into a powerful new asset for reaching students who the districts have failed to serve for decades.

In the next chapters, we turn to the biggest technical hurdles that cities are likely to encounter when choice becomes the norm, not the exception.

FAIR ENROLLMENT SYSTEMS

Parents' perceptions of district choice reform will be shaped by their experiences navigating the student enrollment and assignment process. If parents cannot trust the enrollment system, if their children don't get assigned to the schools they prefer, and if some parents find a way to subvert the system, the choice system and likely any other reforms the district is implementing along with choice will be undercut. Designing an enrollment system for citywide parent choice that avoids pitfalls is harder than most administrators imagine. In Chapter 3, Tom DeWire of Baltimore Public Schools draws on the experiences of choice plans in Baltimore, New York, and Boston.



DeWire argues that districts designing a new assignment system should first consider what they value. Is it important that historic feeder patterns be preserved? Are there concerns about students crossing gang territories? Should school populations be engineered for diversity? Are neighborhood schools so important that students should be given geographic preferences? The complicated yet essential task of defining priorities will undoubtedly trigger debate in the community and among charter school leaders.

SERVING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

As charter schools expand to become a large part of a city's public school offerings, a critical challenge is how to ensure that students with special needs have plentiful and effective school options. Betheny Gross and I address this challenge in Chapter 4. We argue that charter schools have a mixed track record on this front, but the reasons that special education rates are often lower in charter schools are complex, and the solutions are not obvious. What is clear is that when districts and charter schools work to resolve these issues, they must avoid re-creating a process-based system that has never served those students well in the past. Instead, they should aim for creative solutions that put choice to its best use, creating innovations that better serve some of the system's most unique students.

SHARING FINANCES AND FACILITIES

The allocation of resources tests even the most well-intentioned charter–district collaboration. By reimagining the distribution of funding, facilities, and other district assets without regard to whether a school is a district school or a charter school, Parker Baxter argues in Chapter 5, districts can strike a unique and powerful bargain with charter schools: shared resources and shared responsibility. Baxter explains Denver's effort to decide which district assets should be shared with charter schools, as well as the principles behind the effort. This is an important case study for any city trying to assess how all students can get a fair share of the community's public school assets.



BUILDING THE SUPPLY OF SCHOOLS

Districts interested in collaborating with charter schools usually are most interested in using charter schools as an avenue to create effective new schools quickly. In Chapter 6, Matt Candler of 4.0 Schools lays out four key elements of forming and supporting high-quality new schools:

- Establish relationships with local communities to understand their needs and gain their partnership for new programs.
- Recruit top talent and develop new leadership teams with an eye not just on principals and other instructional leaders but also on those who can effectively oversee school management and operations.
- Provide intensive support to leadership teams during their first three years.
- Manage the supply of schools by holding low-performing schools accountable for performance, closing the lowest performers, and fostering the expansion and replication of successful programs.

Candler, a cofounder of New Schools for New Orleans, draws on his experience working with the Recovery School District to suggest ways that districts can partner with charter schools to turn around failing schools and to support school-based entrepreneurs.

INFORMING PARENTS

In Chapter 7, University of Colorado Denver's Paul Teske, a premier scholar on parent choice, gives a terrific overview of the challenges of helping parents navigate school choice systems. Based on his past research regarding how parents choose schools, Teske answers these questions: What are the best ways to make sure that low-income, immigrant, and other disenfranchised families are not disadvantaged by choice? What information do all parents need to make wise choices when charter schools and other choices become a significant portion of a city's public school options? What are the highest priority investments and responsibilities districts should take on?



WHY SHOULD CHARTER SCHOOLS COLLABORATE?

In the concluding chapter, I discuss the charter school side of the collaboration equation: Why are charter schools collaborating with districts? What do charter schools have to gain and lose? What kinds of compromises are being made, and what are some possible long-term implications? I argue that working with school districts is a necessary step in the maturation of the charter school sector, a step that may allow charter schools to have an impact on a much higher number of students than they could otherwise reach. But the collaborations are thus far creating schisms within some charter school communities. Deals are being made with districts that some charter school leaders are not willing to sign on to. Ironically, even as formalized collaborations tame longstanding mistrust from the school districts, the collaborations could create long-term animosities within the charter school sector.

In all, these chapters reflect a new reality: a complex new set of political dynamics and technical challenges, which the seemingly innocuous goal of charter–district collaboration has set in motion. If a good number of these unlikely partnerships are successful, many more partnerships could follow, forever undoing the notion that charter schools are not public schools. The deals being struck could allow charter schools to operate with equitable funding, reliable access to facilities, and access to district support infrastructure. Districts could shift to a new role as overseers of equitable school assignment, purveyors of parent information, and managers of knowledge about what works.

On the other hand, these collaborations could turn out to be superficial, consisting of mainly easy wins, such as best-practice conferences or lots of meetings and process but little progress. Worse, district leaders could face severe political backlash from their teachers unions and school boards and abandon the efforts. In many ways, charter–district collaboration is the last best hope for reinventing public education. If charter–district collaboration fails, charter school advocates will have to abandon hope of changing the system and set their sights on replacing it.



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