



Hopes, Fears, & Reality

A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN CHARTER SCHOOLS IN 2011

Robin J. Lake and Betheny Gross, Editors

Center on Reinventing Public Education
University of Washington Bothell

January 2012

Chapter 2

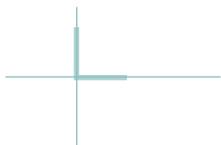
Mastering Change: When Charter Schools and School Districts Embrace Strategic Partnership

Parker Baxter with Elizabeth Cooley Nelson

Almost 20 years after charter schools were first created, several states still don't allow them, and those charter schools that do exist are often vilified. Most U.S. school districts see charter schools as negative competition, a drain on central resources, and a threat to the "system." There is growing evidence, however, that after two decades of opposition and indifference, a paradigm shift may be beginning.

New charter schools continue to open at a steady pace. In 2011, Maine became the newest state to pass a charter school law. Tennessee and North Carolina raised caps on the number of schools allowed, and New Mexico and Florida passed legislation lowering barriers to charter school creation. In Washington, D.C., charter schools now serve almost 50 percent of the city's public school students. In New Orleans, where charter schools are being used to rebuild the city's public school system from the ground up, nearly 70 percent of students attend the charter schools. In Denver, a city with more than 160 public schools of all kinds, almost 20 new charter schools have been created in the past four years.

As charter schools continue to expand across the country, and especially where they serve large percentages of a community's children, school districts and charter schools are increasingly choosing to abandon negative competition in favor of collaborative partnership. This is not to say that charter schools have moved from the margins to the mainstream or that they never face fierce opposition (Lake, 2010). But in a growing number of communities across America, the relationship between charter schools and districts is transforming, from the traditional paradigm of opposition, competition, and indifference to a partnership based on trust and collaboration through a shared mission, shared resources, and shared responsibility (Finkel, 2011).



A PORTFOLIO OF SCHOOLS

One indication that a paradigm shift is underway is the growth of “portfolio” school districts, which have made a strategic decision to provide public education through multiple means. Districts that have adopted this model manage a portfolio of public schools, operating some schools in the traditional way, contracting with independent groups to run others as charter and contract schools, and holding all schools accountable under the same performance standards. Portfolio district leaders are recruiting educators and school operators, not only locally but also nationally, to open new charter schools and semiautonomous district schools and to help play a role in turning around—and in many cases replacing—the lowest-performing schools (Hill, Campbell, Menefee-Libey, Dusseault, DeArmond, & Gross, 2009).

What began with only a handful of pioneers almost a decade ago has now grown to include more than 20 portfolio districts across the country, including such major cities as Los Angeles, Chicago, Denver, and Washington, D.C. Each district is implementing the portfolio strategy in different ways and some more thoroughly than others. Common among these districts, however, is a focus on creating the best possible educational options for the students in their community, regardless of whether those opportunities are provided by district schools or charter schools (Hill & Campbell, 2011).

It should come as no surprise that charter schools are playing a key role in the expansion of portfolio districts across the country. District leaders who act as portfolio managers view charter schools as partners in a shared endeavor, rather than as competitors, and work to leverage the success of high-performing charter schools and networks to provide new options to families and, in some cases, to transform or replace struggling district schools (Lake & Hernandez, 2011).

Any community wants all of its children to be well educated. Once a school district begins to think about the charter schools as part of a larger portfolio of effective public school options—all of which have the goal of educating all children well—the school district can no longer make sense of treating the charter schools with opposition or even indifference just because the schools are not operated directly by the district. A portfolio district focuses on providing high-quality public education opportunities for children by whatever means necessary—the district does not focus on whether a school is district operated or is a charter school but on whether the school performs well.



A portfolio strategy makes student success—not institutional arrangements—the primary focus of all efforts and allows leaders to customize the supply of learning options to their communities’ diverse needs. Continuous improvement is a hallmark of portfolio districts, which commit to expanding and replicating the highest-performing schools and closing and replacing the lowest-performing schools. Portfolio districts constantly search for new ideas (Lake & Hill, 2009).

DISTRICT–CHARTER COLLABORATION

Another indication that the relationship between districts and charter schools is changing is the rise of district–charter collaborations. In a break from two decades of animosity and winner-take-all competition, an increasing number of school districts and charter schools are deciding to form partnerships to better serve the students for whom they share responsibility (Finkel, 2011; Morton, 2011).

In February 2010, a group of superintendents and charter school leaders from 13 cities across the country met in Los Angeles in an effort to try to find common ground. The participants acknowledged the tensions that exist and agreed on the need to put the animosity aside and begin working together to achieve more for all students. “They wanted to look at ways to provide all students in their cities with a portfolio of highly effective education options,” wrote Vicki Phillips (2011), former superintendent of Portland Public Schools and now director of Education, College Ready, at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “They courageously expressed their frustrations with one another and then actively sought a common ground rather than a battleground.”

The Gates Foundation agreed to support this work through the formation of public agreements, district–charter collaboration compacts, crafted and signed by superintendents and charter school leaders willing to commit to collaboration on often divisive issues such as access for all students, including those with special needs; equitable school funding; and equitable access to public school facilities and other public resources. By improving collaboration, the initiative aims to move closer to a goal of 80 percent of students in each city graduating ready for college and careers.

Nearly a year later, the Gates Foundation announced that superintendents and charter school leaders from nine cities had signed collaboration compacts: Baltimore; Denver; Hartford, Connecticut; Los Angeles; Minneapolis; Nashville, Tennessee; New Orleans; New York; and Rochester, New York. “Leading cities in

the country are already working on many of these issues,” Nashville Mayor Karl Dean said at the announcement. “The compacts create a formal collaboration to help put the difficult issues on the table and to recognize a group of leading cities that are demonstrating what cross-sector collaboration should look like in every city.” A second cohort of cities—Boston; Central Falls, Rhode Island; and Sacramento, California—signed compacts in September 2011.

The collaboration compacts are different in each city and are tailored to the needs and issues most relevant in each community. In Baltimore, district and charter school leaders have agreed to work together to expand the availability of high-quality school options throughout the city, regardless of school type. In Denver, the school district and charter schools are creating a common enrollment system for all schools, with a single application, lottery process, and timeline. Other compacts address access to public facilities for all schools, equitable funding, and services to English language learners and students with special needs (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2009).

There are also several large-scale collaborations taking place apart from the Gates Foundation initiative. In southern Texas, for example, IDEA Public Schools (a high-performing charter school network), the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District, and Teach for America have embarked on an ambitious partnership, called the Rio Grande Valley Center for Teaching and Leading Excellence. The effort is funded through a \$5 million Investing in Innovation grant from the U.S. Department of Education and is focused on developing sustainable capacity to recruit, train, and retain high-quality teachers and school leaders for both the charter school network and the school district. In Houston, the district has undertaken a multiyear initiative aimed at turning around its lowest-performing schools, using methods gleaned from high-performing charter schools studied by Harvard’s Roland Fryer and being implemented by his turnaround program, Apollo 20 (Dillon, 2011).

PARTNERING FOR THE FUTURE

More and more school districts are recognizing that they can best achieve their missions not by ignoring or undermining the charter schools in their midst but rather by building trust, collaborating, and strategically partnering with the charter schools to better achieve their shared goal of educating all students well. Likewise, charter schools are increasingly recognizing that their students’ success



depends in part on the ability of the charter schools to leverage public resources beyond their own walls and that they share with school districts a common responsibility to ensure equity and quality for all children in a community.

Increased partnership between charter schools and school districts creates risks and opportunities for both. For charter schools, collaboration means less opposition and can often mean access to public facilities and other common public resources, such as bond funds and mill levies. Collaboration also can ensure greater access to district information systems and bulk purchasing, resources for special education students and English language learners, and inclusion in district professional development offerings.

For districts, greater collaboration can mean more transparency and accountability for student performance, access and services for special populations, and improved public governance and financial management. Districts that partner with charter schools also can leverage the value those schools may provide to fill specific capacity gaps, or they can embed the charter schools into district initiatives to turn around or replace low-performing schools. Districts also can use successful charter schools as models for best practices.

The politics are difficult. For many district leaders, even just talking about working with charter schools can draw the ire of opponents. School districts, by design, are built to centralize control, mitigate risk, and avoid uncertainty. Collaboration with charter schools requires a willingness to think in radically different ways about operations, resources, and the balance that must be struck between stability and innovation. Portfolio and other districts engaged in deep and substantive partnerships with charter schools are, in many cases, transforming themselves into entirely new entities. The mission hasn't changed, but the means of delivering the mission has.

For charter schools, the risks are the flip side of that coin. When collaborating with districts, organizations that are designed to operate outside of the traditional system must now engage with the system, even compromise with it, and in some cases become a part of it. Much of the promise of charter schools as a model for reforming public education more broadly comes precisely from their ability to operate with autonomy, free of the constraints of bureaucratic hierarchy that have hamstrung American school districts for more than a century.



The risks of collaboration are real. It is surely a greater risk, however, to disengage and retreat in the face of change. The age of top-down, centralized, and isolated service delivery—of any kind—is over. The future will belong to those who embrace this reality instead of fighting it. For school districts and charter schools, the emerging transformation from combative competition toward strategic partnership is a part of an ongoing and much larger shift happening all across the planet. The industrial age, with production and delivery models based on centralized, hierarchical authority, is over. We now live in a networked society, defined by open information, interconnectedness, adaptability, and decentralized authority and accountability (Castells, 1996).

The innovation and organizational change expert Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1983) wrote, “Change is always a threat when done to me, but it is an opportunity when done by me.” In very different places, for a wide variety of reasons, school districts and charter schools have begun to adapt together to the reality of their interdependence and the commonality of their goals and responsibilities. Others surely will join them, perhaps realizing that it’s better to be a driver of change than a victim of it.



References

- Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the network society, the information age: Economy, society and culture* (Vol. I). Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Center on Reinventing Public Education. (2009). *District–charter collaboration compact, Denver public schools* (website). Retrieved October 28, 2011, from http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr_pubs/425
- Dillon, S. (2011, September 6). Troubled schools try mimicking the charters. *The New York Times*, p. A16. Retrieved October 28, 2011, from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/06/education/06houston.html?_r=2&src=rechp
- Finkel, E. (2011). *District–charter collaborations on the rise*. District Administration. Retrieved October 28, 2011, from <http://www.districtadministration.com/article/district-charter-collaborations-rise>
- Hill, P., & Campbell, C. (2011). *Growing number of districts seek bold change with portfolio strategy*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved October 28, 2011, from http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/download/csr_files/Brief_PSDP_SchoolDistricts_June11.pdf
- Hill, P., Campbell, C., Menefee-Libey, D., Dusseault, B., DeArmond, M., & Gross, B. (2009). *Portfolio school districts for big cities: An interim report*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved October 28, 2011, from http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/download/csr_files/pub_psdp_interim_oct09.pdf
- Kanter, R. M. (1983). *The change masters: Innovations for productivity in the American corporation*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Lake, R. (2010). Can charter schools become a crossover hit? In R. J. Lake, (Ed.) *Hopes, fears, & reality: A balanced look at American charter schools in 2009* (pp. vii–xi). Seattle, WA: National Charter School Research Project, Center on Reinventing Public Education.
- Lake, R., & Hernandez, A. (2011). *Eliminating the achievement gap: A white paper on how charter schools can help district leaders*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved October 28, 2011, from http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/download/csr_files/WP_PSDP_AchieveGap_Jun11.pdf

- Lake, R., & Hill, P. (2009). *Performance management in portfolio school districts*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved October 28, 2011, from http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/download/csr_files/pub_dscr_portfperf_aug09.pdf
- Morton, N. (2011). IDEA, PSJA districts launch teacher boot camp. *The Monitor*. Retrieved October 28, 2011, from <http://www.themonitor.com/articles/launch-53575-pharr-boot.html>
- Phillips, V. (2011). Learning from each other. *The School Administrator*, 7(68) 10–14. Retrieved October 28, 2011, from <http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=19602>

