



Hopes, Fears, & Reality

A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN CHARTER SCHOOLS IN 2011

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Center on Reinventing Public Education
University of Washington Bothell

January 2012

Conclusion

Will District Collaboration Neuter or Propel the Charter School Movement?

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“We are the Borg. Existence, as you know it, is over. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Resistance is futile.”

—Star Trek: Voyager

The previous sections of this report lay out a strong case for charter–district collaboration. They outline a road map for tackling the toughest technical and philosophical issues that stand in the way of partnerships between organizations that have historically lacked any semblance of trust or goodwill. In the second chapter, Parker Baxter and Elizabeth Cooley Nelson make a case for why true collaboration is in the interest of school districts and charter schools. Who could be against collaboration?

But plenty of charter school leaders and supporters are wary of supporting districts that say they want to partner with charter schools or of creating charter–district collaboration compacts. Some charter school advocates and funders believe it’s foolish to invest in district reform at all. Better, they argue, to put money and policy effort behind creating as many new high-quality charter schools as possible to replace the most dysfunctional district schools. Other advocates are hopeful that school districts can change but worry that district reforms will come at a severe price to the charter school sector, neutralizing the distinctiveness and autonomy that make charter schools effective. There is reason for skepticism and caution. This final chapter explores the charter school interest in charter–district collaboration. What are the possible risks? What are the rewards? And how can charter school leaders most productively move forward with partnerships?

* Parker Baxter, Allison Demeritt, and Elizabeth Cooley Nelson contributed to this conclusion.

RISKS

Concerns among charter school leaders about collaborating with districts are not unfounded—for example, districts do have a terrible track record for following through with promised reforms. Typically, when superintendents push hard for reforms, local teachers unions (or others whose interests are threatened by the reforms) back slates of school board members who favor the status quo and fire the superintendent (Hess, 1998). Because districts typically control the dollars and buildings to which charter schools want access, there is also an inherent power differential that could cause charter schools eager to expand to make “desperation deals” to get more resources. Deals that look acceptable in the moment may later prove debilitating to long-term effectiveness.

For example, charter schools may decide to accept students based on neighborhood assignment zones rather than through a citywide lottery. While this may satisfy a district’s desire to meet the needs of specific neighborhoods, the impact on a charter school could be profound if assigned students don’t buy into the school’s culture, rules, or instructional focus. Parent demands could create a quiet assimilation back into the risk-averse public schools that charter schools were meant to replace.

Even if deals like these work for one school or one group of schools, they may not work for other schools. The charter school community in any given city typically consists of a highly diverse set of schools. Some charter schools may be run by management organizations that need to expand to create economies of scale and that may need access to large, district-owned buildings. Other charter schools may be independent and are happy to operate one small school tucked into a mall or church. Some charter schools do not mind participating in district-accountability and teacher-training systems, while others eschew the district systems. In most cities, the racial diversity of charter school leaders also can be a divisive factor if white leaders are seen as collaborating with white district officials. Such diversity inevitably will result in different interests and concerns about district collaboration and has the potential to create deep schisms in the charter school community. Already, in some cities, conflicts are brewing between charter management organizations and stand-alone schools, between charter schools run by minorities and those run by whites, and between charter schools perceived as being high quality and those with poor test results.



There is also a risk that, in some districts, interest in collaborations will turn out to last only as long as current leaders remain in their positions, thus putting charter schools at risk of losing the advantages of collaboration once they've already made significant concessions. Less damaging, but perhaps more likely, partnership agreements could be used to convince funders that districts are reformist, but implementation might never move beyond superficial "best practices" conferences. The real promise of collaboration—shared resources and responsibility—might never be realized.

REWARDS

While charter schools have a lot to lose, they also have much to gain. For example, when it comes to sharing responsibility for students with special needs, even the perception that the charter school sector is not serving students equitably damages its reputation with policymakers. A charter–district agreement for an effective and equitable citywide approach to special education benefits both charter schools and students.

Moreover, the continued expansion of charter schools depends on access to facilities and more equitable financing. Without increased certainty of those resources, the sector will continue to post only modest gains in growth. To really become a force for serving dramatically more students nationwide, charter schools need to find another solution besides lobbying state legislators in the midst of a very tough economic climate. Negotiating local deals with districts may be a much more promising path toward dramatic growth of the charter school sector.

Another potential benefit to collaboration is avoidance of regulatory or litigious risk. If resources and responsibility are not mitigated through collaboration, they will likely be enforced through the state education agency and through lawsuits. For example, in New Orleans, where a lawsuit regarding special education is underway, charter schools are not party to the suit; the Recovery School District (RSD) is the defendant, but the court's decision will apply to charter schools. If charter schools had been in proactive conversations with the RSD to reach an agreeable plan for shared responsibility for students with special needs, perhaps charter schools would have been less vulnerable to a suit.



AVOIDING BAD DEALS

While it is in charter school leaders' interest to negotiate and collaborate, they risk coming out on the losing end, so they need to adopt strategies that might mitigate the risk for bad deals or insincere promises. The following strategies are adapted from "When David Meets Goliath: Dealing With Power Differentials in Negotiations" by Robert S. and Elliot M. Silverstein (2000).

WORK TO CREATE GOODWILL

Especially in cities with a history of vitriolic power plays between charter schools and districts, some charter schools may assume the worst of district negotiators. To overcome a lack of trust, some period of fence mending and sharing of goodwill is probably a necessary first step in new charter–district partnerships before substantive negotiations begin. Local charter school leaders who support collaboration could quietly suggest some of these efforts. Small but honest gestures from the district superintendent, such as the mention of charter schools as partners in closing the achievement gap, can go a long way toward this goal.

ASSUME THAT CHARTER SCHOOLS HAVE SIGNIFICANT POWER

Power arises from dependence and interests, fears, and availability of options, not legal status. Even when charter schools are negotiating with districts that also authorize and oversee them (an apparent power differential), charter schools should recognize that districts have at least as much to lose by sharing resources. Districts could lose board or community support if they are seen as taking resources away from specific schools or neighborhoods. Charter schools can responsibly leverage that power by offering to help calm community concerns in exchange for more resources.

ANTICIPATE WORST-CASE SCENARIOS

In some cases, districts will abuse uneven power even in well-intentioned partnerships. Charter schools may need strategies to counter this action, such as neutral third-party advisors or reviewers and, as much as possible, solidarity among charter schools. Clear and specific written agreements will also help. The collaboration compacts fostered by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation are a

start, but most compacts are aspirational and broad. Collaboration compacts need to be followed up with more specific, actionable, enforceable agreements that: outline two to four major strategies; identify the sequence of steps necessary to achieve clearly defined outcomes; establish who owns decision making for the key, and most contentious, aspects of the agreement; and detail the repercussions for failure to meet obligations. Agreements that allocate risk could be used to spell out, for example, what happens if one party does not follow through with implementation or who bears responsibility if special education costs for a charter school student exceed the per pupil allocation provided by the district. It is easy to agree on high rhetoric but less easy to agree on what “costs” will be paid for noncompliance. However, agreement regarding noncompliance is key for reassuring the less powerful party that collaboration is worth acceptance of the necessary risks involved.

MOVING FORWARD

Nobody knows how the nascent effort to overcome past hostilities will ultimately play out. Will large numbers of districts truly try to reform? Even if they try, will their leaders survive politically? Will local charter school leaders start undermining each other as they vie for district favors? Early indications, from work by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) to facilitate charter-district partnerships, point to reason for optimism, as districts and charter schools realize they have little option but to partner if they hope to achieve their mutual interest of advancing student achievement. At the same time, many of these partnerships seem tentative and, in some cases, premature.

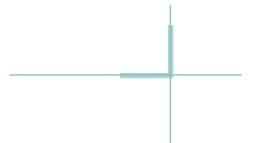
The important question, however, is not whether collaboration is good for the charter school movement or good for districts. Instead, the question is whether these partnerships will benefit students by providing them with greater access to high-quality schools and an equitable allocation of resources.

Such promise is compelling enough to merit serious attention from funders, researchers, advocates, and policymakers. Collaboration is underway in enough places that we have the opportunity to find answers regarding the worst fears and greatest hopes. CRPE will continue to study the implementation and effectiveness of both portfolio districts and collaboration compact cities. We also will continue to support effective implementation by publishing reports and case studies, providing hands-on technical assistance, and supporting a fast-growing network of cities that have committed to a pioneering path.



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Matt Candler is chief executive officer and founder of 4.0 Schools. After teaching and coaching middle school, Candler returned to his hometown to help run the main operations center for the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. After the Olympic Games, Candler studied decision sciences and the emerging charter school sector at the Kellogg School of Management. He then served as founding coprincipal of a K–8 charter school in North Carolina and helped launch other charter schools in the Southeast. From 2001 to 2004, Candler served as vice president of school development for the Knowledge Is Power Program foundation—his team established 37 new schools across the United States. Candler later served as founding chief executive officer of the New York City Center for Charter School Excellence, a \$41 million effort to promote quality charter school creation. Most recently, Candler served New Schools for New Orleans as its first chief executive officer and built a team whose human capital and school creation

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Betheny Gross, Ph.D., is a senior research analyst at the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE). She coordinates CRPE's quantitative research initiatives, including analysis of portfolio districts, charter schools, and emerging teacher evaluation policies. Dr. Gross has examined evidence and outcomes of district reform across the country, including Chicago, New York, New Orleans, Denver, and Broward County, Florida, and she has advised and consulted with district leaders to formulate strategy and implementation. Dr. Gross is an expert at translating complex performance and accountability data for diverse users, from district leaders to parents, in cities including New York and Seattle. She is an authority on teacher quality and labor market issues, and she led the four-year, federally funded Inside Charter Schools initiative, which examined human resource and leadership practices in charter schools. Dr. Gross is coauthor of an upcoming book about portfolio districts and the author of numerous research reports and articles. Her work has been published in several journals, including *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *American Education Research Journal*, *Journal of Education Finance*, and *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. Dr. Gross holds a bachelor's degree in economics and urban studies from the University of Pittsburgh, a master's degree in economics from the University of Iowa, and a doctorate in educational policy studies from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

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This work was originally produced in whole or in part by the National Charter School Resource Center with funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-04-CO-0109/0004. The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department of Education, nor does mention or visual representation of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the federal government.

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