



High-Quality Charter Schools at Scale in Big Cities

RESULTS OF A SYMPOSIUM

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center on **reinventing** public education



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National Charter School Research Project

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—TED MITCHELL, NEWSCHOOLS VENTURE FUND

Introduction

***H**ow can charter schools fulfill their promise of providing a new supply of high-quality schools to replace failing public schools, particularly in urban areas? What do we know about existing scale-up efforts? How do school districts, charter management groups, and the philanthropic community look at the challenges ahead? Who has a definition of what it means to come to scale? How will we know when we get there?*

These questions drove a one-day symposium, “Developing Enough High-Quality Charter Schools to Make a Difference in Big Cities,” held in Seattle on January 20, 2006. Convened jointly by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (the Alliance), and the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) at the University of Washington’s Center on Reinventing Public Education, the symposium explored barriers to creating large numbers of high-quality charter schools to serve the most needy students, and examined new ways of removing these barriers.

The symposium brought together nearly two dozen participants, including two panelists from the Chicago and San Diego school districts; officials from NCSRP and the Alliance; representatives from charter school associations in New York and New Orleans; both charter and non-charter providers (Aspire Public Schools, Envision Schools, KIPP Academies, Replications, Inc., and Advantage Schools); and representatives from funders (Charter School Growth Fund, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Jaquelin Hume Foundation, NewSchools Venture Fund, and Raza Development Fund). (A full list of symposium participants is included at the end of this report.)

These proceedings capture the flavor of the conversation. The discussion concluded that the number of high-quality charter schools today meets nobody’s definition of scale. It also suggested that charter schools are in the midst of a gradual evolution, one that has moved from a belief that proven models would be scaled up rapidly to a more sober view that providers must look for growth opportunities where they can find them and carefully pursue quality. Finally, the discussion turned to the coordinated support infrastructure that would allow continued growth in the numbers of quality charter schools.

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Everything is relative, of course, but already people who follow the 15-year-old charter school concept are speaking about an old logic for charter school growth that has been overtaken by a new realization.

The old logic held that allowing teachers and community groups to start deregulated charter schools would lead to a period of bold innovation and rapid expansion of educational options. The new realization is that the supply of new options has not kept pace with need, particularly in urban areas. The truth is that the rate of new charter school creation has not satisfied demand, caps on the numbers of charter schools are beginning to pinch, and big cities sometimes struggle to find people willing to open new schools or take over those that are failing.

This realization persuaded the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (the Alliance) to convene a seminar to explore next steps in the evolution of charter schools. In convening the meeting, Paul Hill, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, posed the central question: “How can we learn from each other and work together to overcome barriers to quality and scale?” Robin Lake, director of NCSRP, echoed that thought: “No single scale-up strategy is going to work by itself. What we see out there is that, if we are to be serious about finding a way to address the real need, then we’re going to have to create a multi-faceted strategy that builds on the complementarities between many efforts.”

Against that backdrop, participants quickly coalesced around five major issues:

- Bringing charters to scale remains a major challenge.
- Quality is the essential foundation on which scale can be built.

- The politics of school districts make them unlikely partners in scale-up.
- Non-profit governing board requirements are a problem.
- Foundations can be both a help and a hindrance.

THE CHALLENGE OF SCALE

“How long would it take, at the current pace of supply generation, to achieve a tipping point of 20 percent in each of our [target] markets? The answer is 85 years.”

—TED MITCHELL, NEWSCHOOLS VENTURE FUND

At the outset, it was easy to believe that school districts, if offered good new models of charter schools, would quickly replicate them, and that providers, with a newly deregulated market before them, would quickly enter it. But the reality has been different. Charter schools have not always been well designed. Successful schools have been hard to create and harder to replicate. Many school districts have resisted this new sector of public education, and providers have become more discriminating about the markets they will enter and the challenges they will undertake. As a result, many big cities have a difficult time finding enough high-quality charter schools to replace failing schools or provide diverse public school options.

As NCSRP’s Robin Lake pointed out, the “supply of people who can start charter schools on their own is dwindling.” The first wave of what she called “mad-dog principals,” people willing to mortgage their own homes, is over. Partly in recognition of that problem, many funders and policymakers have invested in organizations that can replicate successful charter schools, but even those efforts are limited. Although the numbers of non-profit providers seeking to operate multiple charter schools are growing, most are starting schools at a rate of only four or five a year, and for-profit providers are retrenching. The KIPP Academy model (Knowledge is Power Program), as just one example, now operates about fifty schools in targeted areas, instead of the hundreds spread far and wide that it had anticipated.

The situation described by Lake may not be altogether bad, agreed participants. “I’m not sure if everything’s slowed down or if we just started it all up too quickly,” observed

Mike Feinberg of KIPP Academies. He noted that it is easier to describe a promising new school than to make it happen. “School people confuse school design with school implementation. Designs can be wonderful, but if you don’t have the nuts and bolts in place, there’s nothing to attach the design to.”

In many ways, suggested Steven Wilson (formerly of Advantage Schools), “We were our own worst enemies in trying to do too much too soon. We underestimated how each new district was a complete ‘one-off’ [stand-alone problem]. It was like starting a different new business everywhere at the same time. Rules . . . regulations . . . expectations . . . everywhere we went they were different.”

Wilson rattled off a series of daunting scale-up challenges unanticipated at the outset:

- state caps limiting the number of charters;
- the need to enter many more markets than anticipated simply to generate enough revenues to meet costs;
- accepting tight time frames, such as signing contracts in February and starting schools in September; and
- locally elected school boards and charter school non-profit governing boards continually undermining providers.

All of these combined to make it difficult to do what was essential to launching a significant number of high-quality charter schools: implement the provider’s model with fidelity.

What would coming to scale mean? “Does it mean that all schools are ‘charters?’” asked Nelson Smith of the Alliance. “Or does it mean that all kids are getting a high-quality education in schools that are autonomous, mission-driven, and held to high standards—whether they’re called ‘charter schools’ or not?”

Ted Mitchell of the NewSchools Venture Fund offered three goals for charter school scale-up:

- helping charter management organizations (CMOs) achieve their own aspirations about the numbers of schools they would operate;
- attaining a tipping point in a local city, perhaps 15-20 percent of students enrolled in charters, such that the district would be forced to innovate in order to compete; and

- establishing, at a national level, a network of like-minded individuals and organizations moving forward.

It is possible that 20 percent is insufficient in some jurisdictions, noted Smith. Nearly one-quarter of the students in Washington, D.C., are in charter schools, he pointed out—a reality that has not greatly changed public schools in the city. “It’s not a number,” maintained Shivam Mallik Shaw of the Gates Foundation, “it’s the ability to leverage others.”

The reality is that nobody at the meeting believed that charter schools have reached scale, no matter how the term was defined or modified. And all agreed that the road to scale is much rockier than anyone imagined.

QUALITY: ESSENTIAL TO SCALE

“In a movement like this, you have to worry about quality. In Milwaukee, some weak schools were opened too fast. They weren’t that good and made false promises to minority parents. Now you have disenfranchised parents who gave this opportunity a try and it didn’t work.”

—HOSANNA MAHALEY JOHNSON, CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The justification for charter schools has always rested on the lack of quality in most big-city school systems. In the final analysis, unless charter schools can demonstrate that they are high-quality alternatives to existing schools, parents are unlikely to become advocates for them. Why express dissatisfaction with the status quo, only to accept more of the same?

John Elwell of Replications, Inc. summarized the issue: “Parents in Harlem want what everyone else wants. They want safe, good schools. Charters? Who cares? Unless charter means better—then everyone cares.” Charter schools will succeed, he maintained, “if they depend on quality.”

An important quality consideration in urban areas is student safety, noted Gisele Huff of the Jaquelin Hume Foundation. Parents want to make sure their children are safe in school and on the way to and from school. “So quality is essential, but it’s a very nuanced definition that begins with safety.”

All of the administrative and political hurdles to charters complicate things, acknowledged the NewSchools Venture Fund's Mitchell, but underestimating the challenge of providing high-quality schools in difficult environments was a miscalculation. "As we go through the bottlenecks to charter scale, we are tempted to often think about policy impediments and district structural impediments. Those are critical, but I do think that this issue of attaining academic quality was highly underestimated by all of us," he said.

While there was much discussion of the potential advantages of replicating successful school models to get more consistent quality, there were also frank admissions that that strategy comes with its own challenges. "This isn't McDonald's [where everything can be controlled and quality is simply a matter of doing the same thing every time] . . . The process of replicating a good school isn't easy or predictable," said the Alliance's Nelson Smith.

For KIPP Academies, quality rests on leadership, noted Feinberg, one of the organization's co-founders: "We spend 90 percent of our time on people and people and people and people—and then more people. It starts and ends with the school leader. Our misunderstanding is that we thought great people could work with everyone, but we're finding that even great people need hand-holding." KIPP, with fewer than fifty schools, thought it would have hundreds by now, noted Feinberg. "But we can only grow as fast as we can find good people, and we are not able to find all the people we need."

Brian Bennett, former San Diego school administrator, drew on his experience to argue that national management companies' biggest quality hurdle is adapting their models to communities: "Where CMOs and EMOs tend to run into problems is tailoring their program to the local needs. Absent the ability of CMOs and EMOs to make that adjustment away from their national model, we will constantly run into difficulty with the stability of their charters." This perception was echoed by Hosanna Mahaley Johnson: "Chicago is a collection of neighborhoods . . . The politics of each of these neighborhoods is all local and providers have to understand that."

The consensus seemed to be that communities should pursue a combined strategy that both cultivates local entrepreneurs and taps outside providers. "We can't make this an either-or situation," argued Don Shalvey of Aspire. "You need both outside expertise and local people. At Aspire, we try to open schools with local homegrown talent, because these people are closer to the community."

Nelson Smith put it succinctly: "Growth with quality is key to earning a charter school future with scale."

THE POLITICS OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS: UNWILLING PARTNERS

“If you’re a superintendent, which are you more afraid of? Ten charter schools that are average? Ten charter schools that are really bad? Or ten charter schools that are so good they are embarrassing your district? When you think about it, what incentive is there for a district superintendent to keep pushing charter school growth?”

—ANDY SMARICK, NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Brian Bennett offered a cautionary tale about district collaboration with charter schools. Under former superintendent Alan Bersin, San Diego Unified was a congenial home to charters. “When we opened four new charters in 2004-05, we hit a major milestone. We had more than 10 percent of the kids, 14,000 students out of 132,000 in the district, enrolled in thirty-four charter schools. Now we’ve lost that superintendent. We’ve lost a supportive board. We used to have a charter school office. We’ve lost that too.” Whenever San Diego, under Bersin, took one step forward, organized opposition from the teachers union always developed, according to Bennett. Even once-friendly districts can change to hostile with a single election. Political retaliation, Bennett said, “is a risk associated with scale.”

Even in the rare districts where superintendents and school boards favor chartering, permanent central office staff probably will not. There is a “silent opposition” among permanent staff of district central offices, participants agreed. “I have found, on our best days, that 70 percent of district-level staff will always oppose a change in power shifting. On some days, I thought it was 90 percent,” said Bennett. One consequence of district hostility to charters is that only about 50 percent of charters are authorized by school districts—although districts represent 90 percent of all authorizers. Non-district authorizers, including universities and non-profits, tend to authorize more charters and have more ambitious chartering efforts.

In Oakland, noted Gisele Huff, funders are considering putting multi-millions into redesigning the district. Such a redesign effort is meant to “completely revolutionize the district. In other words, to make the district a servant of the schools rather than the other way around.”

The consensus in the business community, noted Steven Wilson, is that local “school boards are a disaster.” The reason observers do not see more districts adopting charters as a reform strategy is that, with few exceptions, superintendents and boards are reluctant to cede control. “Districts with declining enrollment will always be pressured not to authorize charters, because that removes funds from the existing system. Superintendents and boards are both creatures of the system,” Wilson concluded.

In a perverse way, *No Child Left Behind*, which should ostensibly encourage charters because it requires that children in low-performing schools be offered options, works against charters in a district environment. NCLB has frightened school boards into thinking that they must control everything. As a result, “Districts now see restructuring, not charter schools, as the preferred option.” Without access to equal funding, charters are typically in trouble in local school districts, and that is particularly true under NCLB, argued Bennett.

Despite the many challenges when working with districts, some argued that the opportunities that do arise—a reform-minded superintendent or pro-charter mayor—must be capitalized upon. Steven Wilson offered another way to think about the role of the district in charter school scale-up: “The answer to the question [of whether the school district is a good locus to pursue scale] . . . depends on what we think about the long-term organization of the school systems. Do we want districts to be the providers of schools in the future? I think depending on how you come out on that question affects which strategy you choose.”

A running commentary emerged about the extent to which charters could be encouraged by organizing parents, consulting with districts, working for state-level policy changes, or battling with unions. As Gisele Huff pointed out: “The state is the entity that writes all the regulations, that decides how teachers are certified—all of the things that are the stumbling blocks for a reform movement are in the hands of the state.”

However, opinion seemed to be on the side of organizing parents. Although taking to the barricades against the “establishment” appealed to some, others thought that going to war with districts is likely to encourage a counterproductive “us” versus “them” dynamic that traditional educators would undoubtedly exploit to undermine charter school growth.

Dealing with the politics of the state (writ large), of communities, and of school districts was a significant theme throughout the symposium, but a consensus about how to proceed was hard to discern.

NON-PROFIT GOVERNING BOARDS: REQUIREMENTS ARE A CHALLENGE

“A good board understands the distinction between the board role and the executive role and acts appropriately. But trying to find boards that behave with that level of sophistication at scale has been a very difficult proposition.”

—STEVEN WILSON, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Charter schools do not just emerge full-blown from thin air. They have to be established and authorized under state law. Most state charter laws provide that authorizers (whether LEAs, universities, or other bodies) will grant charters only to non-profit groups. The general theory behind this is that non-profits advance important public goals, such as using excess revenues to support the mission of the organization and ensuring community-based control of schools. Few states allow for-profits to run charter schools directly.

On the surface, for-profit providers such as Edison Schools can work with this restriction by entering into contracts with local non-profit entities or by establishing non-profits to accept a local charter. Non-profit entities actually receive the charter and then contract with providers to operate schools. But what seems too simple on paper turns out to be very difficult in practice. Steven Wilson summed up the challenge this presents to management organizations: “A good board understands the distinction between the board role and the executive role and acts appropriately. But trying to find boards that behave with that level of sophistication at scale has been a very difficult proposition.”

Some local non-profits are agenda driven and wind up trying to micromanage the schools for which they have contracted. Many have weak governing boards; they have little capacity to oversee the school and have trouble fielding authorizers’ inquiries. Most, even the non-profits established by the profit-making vendors, have trouble distinguishing between the oversight function of a board and the executive function of running a school.

Dealing with local governing boards is also an issue for non-profit management organizations, such as KIPP. “Along with good people, you have to have a good local charter board,” said KIPP co-founder Mike Feinberg. “They can make or break you. But what we discovered is that the start-up board is rarely good enough. The qualities that make for a good start-up board aren’t necessarily the qualities the board needs as the school grows.”

Aspire, which restricts its operations entirely to one state, operates eleven charter schools in five counties in northern California. Aspire operates only charter schools, refuses to manage “contract” schools, and deals with the board-management issue in a straightforward way, according to Dan Shalvey: “Aspire has a single board (including an appointed executive committee) which meets only four times a year. Of necessity, such a board restricts itself to broad oversight functions, not the micromanaging of details.”

From the perspective of profit-making EMOs, the requirement to work with charter boards creates dysfunctional situations. “It’s hard to work with people who’ve never managed anything more than a home budget,” observed Steven Wilson. Several participants stressed the financial and political costs that national organizations incur as a consequence of having to partner with charter boards and questioned whether the public benefits have materialized.

Complaining that contracts with charter boards are virtually meaningless, Wilson proposed nationalizing the charter movement. His agenda involved national standards and assessments, streamlining the regulatory environment with a common charter application shared by authorizers, and common accountability templates. To deal with the non-profit board issue, he proposed permitting authorizers to bypass non-profits entirely by awarding charters directly to profit-making EMOs. Although none of the meeting attendees expressed opposition to Wilson’s idea, some expressed doubt about its political viability.

FUNDERS: HELP OR HINDRANCE?

“Can funding hurt? Absolutely. In some frothy markets, all the money’s going to the same people. Millions are going to some schools, with nothing available elsewhere.”

—JOHN LOCK, CHARTER SCHOOL GROWTH FUND

Funders, whether venture capitalists or traditional philanthropies, struggle with many of the same issues. Funders are strategic in their own terms, noted Paul Hill, but it is not always clear that they are strategic in the aggregate.

Most funders seek local partners. “Where is capacity being built in terms of school leadership?” asked Jim Ford. That’s where the Raza Development Fund wants to place

its bets. “A community-based organization or a CDC (Community Development Corporation) . . . can be a very good partner . . . to bring a school into a community. It can be the catalyst to organize the community.” Shivam Mallik Shaw of the Gates Foundation offered a similar observation: “We very much work with our grantees to invite other core funders to the table . . . [M]ore than anything we need them for long-term sustainability . . . We find that you need to have local funders with a stake in the game.”

The difficulty, according to the Charter School Growth Fund’s Lock, is that frequently funders start “chasing the school de jour . . . and flood them with money.” Lock worried that schools receiving the most funds tend to be the least accountable and that funders are not “taking risks and supporting mavericks.”

Giselle Huff of the Hume Foundation came down firmly on the side of taking risks. It’s time to “push the envelope,” she declared, insisting on the need to reshape school districts and rewrite state law, while placing charter schools in local storefronts and exploring the possibility of individualizing schooling through on-line education. Otherwise, she charged, foundation efforts amount to little more than trying to “desalinate the ocean with buckets of rainwater.”

Despite the challenges described by Lock and Huff, there was a clear sense at the meeting that most funders are very strategic in what they attempt to do. Indeed, noted Nelson Smith, charter school funders often seem to ask better questions about school performance than authorizers. Shaw outlined a Gates Foundation approach that focuses on quality authorizing, tight instructional and organizational models (instead of individual schools), support for organizations such as New Leaders for New Schools, and school district leadership. Lock reported that the Charter School Growth Fund focuses on outcomes and the development of “quality seats” in schools. The Growth Fund targets its support to organizations that can demonstrate quality with clear evidence of effectiveness.

Ted Mitchell described the NewSchools Venture Fund as an intermediary between foundations trying to leverage large-scale change and entrepreneurs. Suggesting that philanthropic opportunities existed at the balance points between action and reflection, risk-taking and deep investment, new models and proven approaches, he worried about a cautious-as-you-go approach. “Inertia,” he warned, “is the great ally of the system. Funders need to avoid it.”

COMMENTARY

“We’re sadder but wiser today.”

—PAUL HILL, CENTER ON REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

A decade and a half into the charter movement, its proponents know that reshaping an enterprise enrolling more than 50 million students and employing 2.5 million teachers is easier said than done. Quantity did not come fast. Quality could not be sacrificed.

It seems clear, noted Hill, that there is a big-district problem and that most large districts are poor hosts for charter schools. Good authorizers are essential to charter school success and so are good providers. If either fails, the public loses confidence. It is also clear that inserting non-profit boards into the process is a problem, but the solution is less obvious. Finally, a single strategy for scale-up is not required from every organization developing new charter schools: KIPP has focused on leadership; Aspire, on local culture; and the Raza Development Fund, on community-based organizations.

Hill closed with several questions. Rather than trying to expand charters everywhere, should advocates focus on perhaps ten localities with the best environment for success? If so, how do we persuade philanthropies to support such an approach? What do we do to encourage more minority-led charter management organizations? And what do we do about unions?

Another major strategic issue: how do we encourage the growing numbers of EMOs and CMOs to become more aware of each other and more willing to collaborate and coordinate?

In the end, three things seemed clear from the discussion. First, approaches to charter school scale-up have evolved over time. The initial phase envisioned individual schools being created on an ad hoc basis. The next phase emphasized replication of successful schools via for-profit and non-profit management organizations. The new phase emphasizes venture capital approaches in which investors look for growth opportunities wherever they can find them. What the symposium seemed to suggest was the possibility that rather than relying on any one of these strategies, the movement should become more strategic in seeking specific cities in which to provide “evidence proofs” that high-quality charters can come to scale and make a difference.

Second, however scale is defined, charter schools are not there yet. After 15 years, there are nearly 4,000 charter schools, but the movement will very quickly run up against a growth ceiling imposed by state “caps” on charter numbers. Even in states where caps are not a barrier, the supply of quality applicants is not nearly large enough to meet the needs of districts and parents looking for alternatives to failing schools. Even modest growth expectations will require a better support infrastructure. Third, what such an infrastructure should be—central office-type supports built by charter management organizations that replicate successful schools, national or state association supports that make it easier for stand-alone charter schools to get started, or third-party incubator-type organizations such as John Elwell’s Replications, Inc. that specialize in supporting scale—is the subject of some controversy within the charter movement. This discussion did not resolve that debate, but it did make clear that the current infrastructure is severely lacking, and offered a variety of steps civic leaders, charter developers, funders, and policymakers could take to support quality at scale in big cities.

NEXT STEPS: TOWARD A NEW INFRASTRUCTURE

“It’s important to separate out the notion of the model from the notion of the scaffolding.”

—JIM FORD, RAZA DEVELOPMENT FUND

The usual suspects came in for their fair share of attention during the symposium. Nobody had a good word to say about public bureaucrats. Predictable political and structural impediments were scrutinized. Unions took their lumps. Beyond some pro forma comments on the need for facilities funds, the issue of financing, oddly enough, got limited attention.

Throughout the course of the discussion, several practical suggestions to support charter school scale-up were put forward. In the aggregate they pointed to the need for a better-coordinated effort to provide local and national support infrastructure. This would involve both the public and private sectors. The tradition of “mad dog” principals, to use Lake’s phrase, got people in the charter world excited about promising new models. But the “scaffolding” to support promising new models, in Ford’s apt term, also requires attention.

Some of the scaffolding is relatively straightforward and likely to cause only minimal discussion. But to the extent the scaffolding suggestions involve changes of consequence in public management or oversight, they are likely to provoke considerable debate.

CITY LEADERS could make some changes almost immediately to encourage the development of more charter schools:

- **Issue more multi-site requests for proposals to attract more providers.** Urban districts justify a lot of what they do on the basis of scale. It flies in the face of district thinking to believe that providers would not also be more attracted to larger-scale opportunities as opposed to “one-offs.”
- **Get creative about meeting the facilities needs of charter schools.** They might consider working with community-based organizations to provide facilities, or, in the case of cities losing school population, leasing excess space to charter operators. Traditional public schools need buildings; charter schools do, too.
- **Consider provisions beyond facilities that ensure long-term stability in contracts with charter providers.** On the assumption that charter providers meet their performance promises, they should not be subject to abrupt contract termination simply because a superintendent moved on or the locus of power on the school board changed.
- **Look beyond traditional K-12 school organizations to broaden the charter base.** Universities, the business community, and other high-capacity local organizations, such as foundations, can make meaningful contributions as charter school operators.
- **Pay serious attention to developing “homegrown” leaders and teachers to reduce “insider versus outsider” and “us versus them” arguments.** A solid leadership base of local talent promises to make it easier for national providers to enter a new community and promote one of the community’s “own.”

CHARTER SCHOOL DEVELOPERS AND PROVIDERS can also do a great deal to advance their own cause:

- **Make it clear that school quality is the foundation** on which charters are built and a prerequisite to mounting large scale-up activities.

- **Be realistic about growth plans** so as not to compromise quality.
- **Use proxies such as school safety and effective school culture** while waiting for data to demonstrate school effectiveness. These data could encourage authorizer support and reassure parents about school quality.
- **Collaborate around leadership, training, human resource, and other “scaffolding” issues.** While providers may offer different approaches to instruction, there is no reason most could not collaborate in these areas.
- **Set ground rules for approaching communities and examine high-leverage communities and funding opportunities.** Developers might work together with each other and with foundations to do this.

FUNDERS with an interest in charters have an essential role to play:

- **Consider supporting combined action of funders and school providers** in cities like New Orleans that could become positive environments for the growth of many charter schools.
- **Permit schools to negotiate their own growth goals and their own impact measurements.**
- **Find a balance between homegrown charter innovations and support for CMOs and EMOs.** Abandoning small-scale innovators might have made sense when scale-up seemed to depend on larger organizations. But it’s not clear that even large organizations can bring charters to scale in the near term. Outside-the-box thinking at the local level should continue to be encouraged. Plus, most of today’s promising scale-up efforts began as single homegrown charter schools, with KIPP as the prime example.
- **Strike another balance between co-funding promising developments for long-term stability and the herd mentality.** This, too, may be easier said than done, but the balance probably lies in collaboration and coordination around diverse providers and schools, not duplication of the same model.
- **Consider investing in research that neither authorizers nor providers can support,** particularly around the possibilities of individualizing learning through new and emerging technological applications.

In the area of **POLICY SUPPORT**, several of the suggestions put forward were equally straightforward, although undoubtedly some of them will provoke discussion:

- **Lift caps and replace them with demanding performance oversight.**
There should be no absolute limit on the numbers of charter schools, but only good ones should be allowed to be renewed.
- **Disaggregate performance data by provider and provider type.**
- **Insist not simply on high-quality providers but also on high-quality authorizers.**
- **Extend beyond school districts for authorizers,** to include institutions of higher education, independent special-purpose charter boards, and prominent non-profit local organizations, including community foundations.
- **Encourage new teacher certification routes for charter teachers,** on the grounds that the essence of a charter school is greater freedom from existing school constraints.

But if the policy support suggestions above are fairly straightforward, a number of others are likely to be much more complex. The suggestion that charters be considered their own local education agencies for special education purposes might prove detrimental. Simpler market-based solutions like risk pools and insurance schemes to protect individual schools against large special education costs are feasible and less risky. There is no more prescriptive area in public schools than special education. If, in the search for funds, charters encourage that particular regulatory entity into the house, they will be hard-pressed to keep others out.

There is probably a lot to be said on behalf of allowing non-profit charter schools in multiple sites to report to a single governing board (as in the Aspire model) and for allowing for-profit companies to hold charters directly (just as school districts can contract directly with for-profits). The requirements for authorizer due diligence and oversight here would probably be high, but states could mitigate the risks and political opposition by permitting such arrangements only for organizations that can demonstrate successful performance outcomes.

A FINAL WORD

The symposium was a fairly sober assessment of where charter schools are and where they are headed. It is clear that the easy victories lie behind charter advocates. The fruit was never low hanging, but whatever was within reach has been picked. Tough slogging lies ahead. School districts may well have been happy to turn over some of their most challenging students to charter schools; they are going to be unlikely to willingly turn over many more.

Still, some valuable lessons have been learned. Exciting new school models have been created and put in place. New appreciation for the significance of leadership has developed. Charter advocates have become comfortable with the sense that it takes time to accomplish great things. The need for host-scaffolding to support new models and local entrepreneurship has become self-evident. Numerous, varied institutional approaches to scaling up networks of charter schools have emerged. And a living, breathing organism, known as the charter school movement, has had new life breathed into it: nearly 3,600 schools (about 4 percent of all schools in the United States) can serve as laboratories for innovation and are a ready source of research and analysis about the possibilities of education when schools are freed of unnecessary restrictions.

The task for charter advocates who want to bring charter schools to scale in urban areas is straightforward: settle in for the long haul, confident that, although both triumphs and disappointments lie ahead, quality is the key to the future of charter schools.

Symposium Participants

Brian Bennett, *San Diego Unified School District (Formerly)*

John Elwell, *Replications, Inc.*

Mike Feinberg, *KIPP Academies*

Jim Ford, *Raza Development Fund*

James Harvey, *Center on Reinventing Public Education*

Paul Hill, *Center on Reinventing Public Education*

Gisele Huff, *Jaquelin Hume Foundation*

Hosanna Mahaley Johnson, *Chicago Public Schools*

Robin Lake, *Center on Reinventing Public Education*

John Lock, *Charter School Growth Fund*

Daniel McLaughlin, *Envision Schools*

Ted Mitchell, *NewSchools Venture Fund*

Bill Phillips, *New York Charter School Association*

Lydia Rainey, *Center on Reinventing Public Education*

Sheri Ranis, *The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation*

Don Shalvey, *Aspire Public Schools*

Shivam Mallik Shaw, *The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation*

Andy Smarick, *National Alliance for Public Charter Schools*

Nelson Smith, *National Alliance for Public Charter Schools*

Sarah Usdin, *New Orleans Charter School Resource Center*

Steven Wilson, *Harvard University; Advantage Schools (Formerly)*

Todd Ziebarth, *National Alliance for Public Charter Schools*

The National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) aims to bring rigor, evidence and balance to the national charter school debate. For information and research on charter schools, please visit the NCSRP website at www.ncsrp.org. Original research, state-by-state charter school data, and links to charter school research from many sources can be found there.



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The Center on Reinventing Public Education at the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington engages in research and analysis aimed at developing focused, effective, and accountable schools and the systems that support them. The Center, established in 1993, seeks to inform community leaders, policymakers, school and school system leaders, and the research community.