

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

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## Introduction

In 2013, Philadelphia initiated an ambitious redesign of its enrollment system that sought to create a common application and lottery for district and charter schools alike. The effort, instigated by the Philadelphia Schools Partnership (PSP) and formalized in the city's Great Schools Compact, had noble goals: improve the fairness and transparency of enrollment for both district and charter schools, reduce duplication and administrative waste, and increase equity of access for families looking to take advantage of school choice. But less than one year into the negotiations between the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) and local charters, the effort was called off.

The result was unfortunate but also predictable: After all, neither district nor charter leaders found it in their interests to help the initiative succeed. While a common application and lottery would make it easier for families to take advantage of school choice, it exposed both sectors to new risks. The district openly worried about the impact of increased competition from charter schools, as families would no longer need to submit multiple applications to secure a spot. As one observer said, "Philadelphia cannot afford this. We can't pay for the number of kids going to charter schools now . . . it is a reality." District officials also risked a community backlash as opponents of the plan fanned the flames, charging that the system would put families' fates in the hands of unaccountable officials whose true intentions were to dismantle neighborhood schools.<sup>1</sup> Charter schools in turn would lose control over their applications, waitlists, and capacity management, all of which had the potential to undermine key operational advantages, such as overenrolling to manage attrition and tailoring applications to ensure that families were a good fit for the school's model. And neither sector trusted the other to support a fair, transparent enrollment process.

Adding to these challenges, the SDP was in the middle of a major fiscal crisis, having just closed 23 traditional district schools and laid off 4,000 staff, including all assistant principals, school secretaries, and guidance counselors. That summer—just a few months into negotiations between the district, charter schools, and the PSP—Superintendent William Hite announced that the schools might not open on time due to the lack of funding to support basic services. The ongoing budget challenges made the risks associated with the initiative seem even more perilous. As one district official lamented, "How can our schools compete when there are no resources?"

***While the road to district-charter collaboration may be paved with good intentions, such initiatives live and die under the pressure of politics.***

A 2017 effort to unify enrollment in Boston met a similar fate. The debate over a controversial ballot initiative to lift a statewide cap on the number of charter schools was heating up just as the district and charter sectors were beginning to negotiate to establish a common application and lottery. The same way the fiscal crisis and school closures muddied the politics in Philadelphia, the heated rhetoric over the ballot initiative—which focused on how increased charter school

enrollments would impact school districts around the state—dealt a fatal blow to the work in Boston. The failure of these efforts to unify enrollment across charter and district schools reveals that while the road to district-charter collaboration may be paved with good intentions, such initiatives live and die under the pressure of politics.

Many who attempt district-charter collaboration point to "politics" as a constraint that affects their work, but little is understood about why some cross-sector initiatives enjoy broad support while others become mired in conflict. With this report, we set out to explore how politics shapes the work of district-charter collaboration and identify strategies that district and charter leaders can use to improve their chances of success. Our research engaged us in literature that would be more familiar to political scientists than to education leaders, with "conflict," not collaboration, as the guiding focus. And this report draws upon examples from our ongoing study of district-charter collaborations in dozens of cities around the country.

Our work on the politics of district-charter collaboration has surfaced some key insights:

**District-charter collaborations are inherently political.** District and charter leaders each possess self-serving concerns and can be more or less aligned in what they hope to accomplish in public education. Supporters of better cooperation between districts and charter schools point to the potential benefits for children and families, but such efforts can only succeed if both sides see that it is to their advantage to work together. Understanding the political tensions and tradeoffs that underlie cross-sector initiatives is essential to setting up district-charter collaborations for success.

**Some cities are not well poised politically for collaboration.** Declining public school enrollment, a weak charter sector, and unfavorable community politics can make collaborations harder to initiate and sustain. These factors may activate both sectors' competitive instincts and undermine their willingness to work together on common goals—even as the need for better coordination increases. As one official told us in response to the city's work on cross-sector collaboration, "This wasn't worth [our] time and effort."

**Mutual wins and shared values may offer a "sweet spot" where collaboration can take root.** With few exceptions, when district-charter collaborations find success it is because the sectors found it in their interests to work together, not because either made a one-sided sacrifice. This requires the political savvy to identify issues of concern and carve a path forward that allows each side to get something they want. Collaboration rarely "just happens"; it relies upon the strength of each sector's commitment to the effort in the short and longer term. Leaders in both sectors have critical roles to play in fostering the desired buy-in.

Our research has generated some concrete recommendations for district and charter leaders looking to collaborate and for state policymakers and philanthropists who choose to support them:

**District and charter leaders** should understand that overcoming the political challenges of collaboration demands savvy leadership and active coalition building. This means cultivating leaders who can work across the district-charter divide, strengthen support among influencers such as mayors and community groups, and identify bargaining chips that can bring even the most reluctant partners along. Cities making progress on collaboration are willing to acknowledge the give-and-take of negotiations, identify issues of mutual concern, and work to increase alignment on core values—such as ensuring that underserved neighborhoods benefit from the expansion of charter schools.

*Overcoming the political challenges of collaboration demands savvy leadership and active coalition building.*

When cities lack these fundamentals or have a history of strife and mistrust, district and charter leaders should focus on "baby steps" to success (e.g., focusing on small, mutually beneficial deliverables) and postpone taking on initiatives that impose significant risks on one or both sectors (e.g., unified enrollment).

**State policymakers** can increase the likelihood that district-charter collaborations find success by reducing or eliminating disincentives to work together. Although charter schools are not solely responsible for the declining fiscal fortunes of districts such as those in Philadelphia and Detroit, the "zero sum" financial realities make it difficult for the sectors to find common ground. Addressing these challenges requires creative solutions.<sup>2</sup> In the short run, states could reduce legacy burdens (especially those that are imposed through state policy, as is the case with some pension costs) and offer "hold harmless" funding for short periods of time to break through the deadlock that sometimes comes with district-charter collaborations. These state investments can create short-term financial inefficiencies (and perhaps be less attractive to state policymakers focused on delivering fair and economical school finance systems), but they can also help district-charter collaborations take root on issues that directly impact public school families. In the longer term, states should consider opportunities to better align the incentives for districts and charter schools to work together. This may include ending the practice

of funding charter schools via line items out of district budgets, allowing district superintendents and school boards to take credit (and blame) for charter school performance, and encouraging new approaches to education governances that reduce fragmentation and turf battles.<sup>3</sup> Steps like these can help to increase the benefits and reduce the costs associated with district-charter collaboration.

**Philanthropists** can support locally driven collaboration initiatives in cities where district and charter leaders have established cooperative relationships—and even in places where they have not. In cities where mistrust is high and collaboration is more nascent, however, funders should proceed cautiously, strive to remain staunchly sector-neutral themselves, and temper their goals for collaboration, as big initiatives are unlikely to get off the ground. Funders should also be cautious about pushing prematurely for ambitious reform proposals, as their presence can trigger opposition from national advocacy groups and reduce opportunities for problem solving.

The message of this report is a simple one: Politics is often seen as a constraint that would-be collaborators should avoid, yet no district-charter collaboration can find success without it. District and charter leaders must understand, as well as harness, the competing interests and values that shape the success and failure of collaboration efforts.

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## Studying the Politics of District-Charter Collaboration

Since 2011, CRPE has conducted hundreds of phone and field interviews with district, charter, and community leaders in **23 cities that have formalized partnerships** between the school district and charter schools by signing District-Charter Collaboration Compacts supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In addition, CRPE has tracked cooperative efforts across the nation as part of its nearly **decade-long work with portfolio cities**, where charter schools are part of the strategy for ensuring that every child has access to an effective school.

Through this work, district and charter leaders regularly shared how “politics” created obstacles to better cooperation between the sectors. But we lacked a framework for understanding how and why politics can impede work that can benefit both sectors and, more importantly, the children and families they collectively serve. To better understand how politics both constrains and creates opportunities for district-charter collaboration, we surveyed the literature, focusing on strands of inquiry that seek to explain why people and organizations come together in pursuit of common ends. This includes work on collective impact initiatives and public-private partnerships, which seek to leverage the joint capacity of public and private actors to solve complex problems, as well as research on coalition building and collective action, which explores the incentives for and barriers to cooperative work. Although very little of the research reviewed concerned itself directly with district-charter collaboration, the motivations for and challenges of cross-sector cooperation would be familiar to any observer of this work.

We leverage this literature to inform understanding of how politics shapes the work of district-charter collaboration and identify opportunities for would-be collaborators to find success. Throughout, this report draws upon examples generated through interviews and other engagements with cities pursuing district-charter collaborations. While this paper distills some of our emerging ideas about the conditions for collaboration, we do not subject our ideas to empirical test so much as draw upon examples to illustrate and provide some empirical basis for the conclusions we have drawn.

## The What, Why, and How of District-Charter Collaboration

*“No suggestion for reform is more common than ‘what we need is more coordination.’”  
— Pressman and Wildavsky, 1983*

In many cities around the country, traditional school districts are no longer monopoly providers of public schools. Instead, multiple organizations—school districts, state agencies, charter school authorizers, and for-profit and nonprofit charter management organizations—oversee and operate public schools. These changes have opened up opportunities for school choice and improved access to high-quality schools in a number of cities. But they have also resulted in a system of public education that can be difficult for families to navigate and for government to oversee and improve.

District-charter collaboration is one answer to mitigating some of the unintended consequences that have resulted from these changes. These cross-sector collaborations are typically defined loosely and can include any voluntary effort, large or small, to coordinate work or solve problems together.<sup>4</sup> As CRPE has documented over the course of its six-year engagement in the 23 cities that signed District-Charter Collaboration Compacts, collaborations can engage the sectors in a variety of issues, vary substantially in the scope of the problems they seek to resolve, and can expose one or both sectors to risks.

Compacts are one way to formalize the commitments underlying district-charter collaborations. These non-legally binding documents typically articulate shared principles and goals for the work and outline specific actions or agreements between the parties.<sup>5</sup> But formalized cross-sector collaboration can and does emerge without a signed compact, as in the case in Washington, D.C., where the deputy mayor convenes district and charter leaders to address issues of mutual concern. Informal district-charter collaborations can happen in either setting, as when sector leaders support each other’s work or engage in joint problem solving.

District-charter collaboration initiatives are relatively new, but they are not unique. Federal, state, and local governments increasingly work together with private for-profit and nonprofit entities in efforts to solve complex public problems. In education, initiatives such as the Harlem Children’s Zone and community schools leverage collaborations between schools, districts, and community-based nonprofits to coordinate services and improve outcomes for children and families.<sup>6</sup> And charter schools themselves regularly collaborate with other organizations through strategic alliances that aim to enhance capacity, share resources, and solve problems of mutual concern.<sup>7</sup>

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## Collaboration Is Inherently Political

If cross-sector collaborations are fairly common, why do district-charter collaborations struggle so much? Like other collaborations, district-charter collaborations must wrestle with issues of turf, bureaucratic inertia, and differences in leadership style and organizational culture that impede shared work and problem solving. These issues are challenging to resolve, but they pale in comparison to the biggest issue that defines district-charter collaboration: competition over students.

*The biggest issue that defines district-charter collaboration: competition over students.*

Unlike many other cross-sector collaborations, district-charter collaborations frequently ask one or both sectors to expose themselves to increased competition by:

- Opening up new opportunities for charter schools to expand (increased risk for the district),
- Increasing the number of high-needs students whom charter schools must serve (increased risk for charter schools), or
- Offering resources (e.g., money) or professional advice to enhance the other sector's ability to compete (increased risk for both district and charter schools).<sup>8</sup>

Framed in these terms, district-charter collaboration is not a “natural” state of affairs. No one would be surprised to learn that Uber and traditional taxi companies do not work together to better serve a city's transportation needs. They do not collaborate because doing so would undermine their competitive advantage (even as it may improve city residents' access to transportation services). *Collaboration is hard between competitors because conflict is “baked in.”*

### The (Political) Motivators of District-Charter Collaboration

Despite the challenges of district-charter collaboration, leaders from both sectors come to the table because collaboration offers benefits. In our multiyear study of collaboration initiatives around the country, charter and district leaders pointed to a multitude of reasons for deciding to work together, including improving access to facilities and funding, expanding access to high-quality schools, and creating common accountability standards.<sup>9</sup> Some education leaders even recognized a political benefit—for example, charter schools that reached out to work with districts on professional development hoped to be perceived as a team player in the community, instead of a rival trying to starve the district of students and revenue.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the variety of issues these initiatives sought to tackle, we found district-charter collaborations were motivated by common factors (see table 1).

In some cities, collaboration was primarily framed as a way for each sector to get something that would enhance its own organizational capacity. We refer to these types of collaborations as *transactional*, as they typically involve bargaining over material resources such as funding and facilities.

In other cities, collaboration was framed largely in terms of beliefs about what is “right,” such as expanding access to school choice. We refer to these types of collaborations as *values-based*, as they are typically grounded in shared values and understandings of a problem.

**TABLE 1. Defining the Political Motivators of District-Charter Collaboration**

Type of collaboration	Political motivator	“Glue” that holds collaboration together	Suggestive examples
Transactional	Access to resources and capacity	Bargaining and resource exchanges	<b>Charters:</b> access to facilities, funding <b>Districts:</b> burden sharing around special education, access to philanthropic support
Values-based	Values or beliefs about the problem and what is “right”	Fostering shared values and understanding of the problem	Expand school choice Expand high-quality seats

Different parties can be motivated to collaborate for different reasons. A reform-minded superintendent might embrace charter schools based in large part on the value of expanding school choice, even as charter schools reciprocate because it enables access to desired resources. Thus goes the old adage “politics makes strange bedfellows.” And the underlying motivators can evolve over time, across cities, and even for the suggestive examples we provide above—for example, when a district comes to benefit materially from an expansion of charter schools that was initially motivated by the ideas of a visionary superintendent.<sup>11</sup>

### *Transactional Collaborations*

Political scientist Harold Laswell once opined, “Politics is about who gets what, when, and how,” a refrain that would be familiar to district and charter leaders looking for ways to collaborate. District-charter collaborations often involve bargaining over resources, such as facilities and funding, and negotiations over burden sharing around issues such as special education, mid-year enrollments, and discipline. These concerns tap into both sectors’ desire to gain additional advantages or shed liabilities.<sup>12</sup>

In the Spring Branch Independent School District (SBISD) outside of Houston, district leaders were concerned that students in two schools in a high-poverty area of the district were falling behind academically and that the schools needed an infusion of ideas and professional development to improve performance as well as morale in the schools. In the same area of Houston, two successful charter school operators were ready to open new schools but did not have the capital to purchase or lease a school building. The leaders met and developed the SKY Partnership—a collaboration between SBISD and charter organizations KIPP and Yes! Prep to colocate the charter schools on the district campuses. The district hoped to infuse the charters’ successful high-expectations approach to learning, and the charter organizations saw the arrangement as a way to increase their own impact without needing the resources for a facility.

While the sectors’ pursuit of additional advantages have derailed district-charter collaborations more than once, it can also support better alignment between the sectors. For example:

In Central Falls, Rhode Island, a high-performing charter school successfully pushed to attract more students with disabilities. When these students enrolled, the school learned that its teachers did not have the training for full classroom inclusion. However, the district special education staff had decades of experience, yet as enrollment declined, the district was having trouble keeping them busy enough to justify full-time employment. The two sectors developed a partnership in which the district special education staff provided hands-on classroom-based support and professional development to the charter school. In turn, the charter compensated the district for the staff time. The charter got the professional development it needed, the district was able to retain valuable special education expertise, and, best of all, services to the students improved.

Families living in the Roxbury neighborhood in Boston had few high-performing public school options. When the city deemed the area a “Promise Neighborhood” (a high-needs area that was awarded resources and funding to improve health, safety, and education of residents), the district worked with a charter operator to open a school there. This alleviated pressure from the district to ensure that a new school with a strong performance record opened in the neighborhood. The collaboration enabled the charter operator to serve the students it was designed to serve, right in the neighborhood where they were living.

Sometimes, charter and district leaders are able to identify areas of mutual concern and collaboration to provide a means for resolving a shared problem. For example, in 2017, when Chicago Public Schools and the state charter network aligned their state-level advocacy for increased funding for public schools, it was very little added work, yet the payoff was large. Using a coordinated strategy, the charter sector helped push for the August 2017 passage of legislation that would benefit both sectors with more per-pupil dollars.

***Collaborations can offer substantial value for children and families even as they impose significant costs on both charter schools and districts.***

But self-serving concerns—the most pressing being maintaining enrollment—also constrain what would-be collaborators (and those who support their work) can hope to accomplish. Collaborations can offer substantial value for children and families even as they impose significant costs on both charter schools and districts. For example, a growing body of evidence suggests that parents benefit when information about school quality is transparently reported in one place.<sup>13</sup> But these changes

can expose both sectors to risks, as families can easily identify schools that are underperforming, thereby drawing attention to a problem that would otherwise be hidden. These factors, among others, can undermine the sectors’ willingness to invest the time and energy that collaboration requires.

### ***Values-Based Collaborations***

In the case of the District-Charter Collaboration Compacts, shared values or beliefs about public education were a powerful mechanism for opening the dialogue and helping to overcome (at least initially) the zero-sum, tit-for-tat nature of bargaining that frequently dominates conversations between charter schools and districts. When cities launch values-based collaborations, they are often motivated by the desire to solve a public problem that neither sector can solve on its own.

Denver successfully met its Compact goal of increasing the number of seats for students with disabilities within charter schools. However, these new seats, like their counterparts within district schools, were largely created in specialized educational environments and did not include children who did not require support. Both charter and district leaders realized that the net was cast too wide and that they needed to work harder to ensure that as many students receiving special education services as possible could remain in classrooms with peers who do not have a disability. District and charter leaders recognized this as a shared challenge, and they tackled it collaboratively. Special education leaders within both sectors met regularly and secured grant funding jointly to allow for travel to schools around the country that were recognized for high rates of mainstreaming. This partnership ultimately resulted in the opening of two new district schools and two new charter schools with higher than average enrollments of students with disabilities. Both sectors modeled their schools on ones that they had visited together on their tours.

In Massachusetts, UP Education Network was founded in 2010 with the mission of working with districts to transform chronically underperforming schools. Its leaders view districts as partners in this work, not competitors or adversaries. They currently operate six schools serving 3,000 students as “in-district charters” focused on turnaround and have been the preferred partner for schools at risk of state intervention.

Values-based alignments provide an important mechanism to accomplish complex and costly collaboration initiatives. Across the 23 cities that signed Compacts that CRPE tracked over the past three years, just five (Boston, Central Falls, Chicago, Denver, and New Orleans) made significant progress toward more advanced and sustained engagements between district and charter schools. In all of these cities, district superintendents and school boards viewed charter schools as core components of their plans to improve local public schools and provide families more school choice. These values made it possible for them to collaborate with charter schools, despite the costs collaboration initiatives can bring. As one district official told us, “When you have agreement in principle between [district and charter leaders] . . . the day-to-day negotiations become easier.”

But shared values are hardly a surefire way to keep collaboration initiatives afloat; collaborations can and often do affect groups that live outside of both sectors, such as parents, community organizations, and teachers unions. These groups can put pressure on district superintendents and school board members to renege on previously agreed-upon principles, or they can force out existing leadership via elections and superintendent dismissals.

## Not All Cities Are Well Poised to Initiate Collaborations

Understanding what motivates district-charter collaboration is important because it provides a path for evaluating why some initiatives fail to make progress in achieving their goals and how collaborations may evolve over time. But charter and district leaders’ motivations for collaboration do not exist in a vacuum; they are shaped by larger organizational and political circumstances, which neither sector controls directly.

We sought to identify contextual factors that shape the prospects for district-charter collaboration. Across the cities studied, we looked for financial, organizational, and political conditions that undermined one or both sectors’ willingness to work together, and some common patterns emerged (table 2).

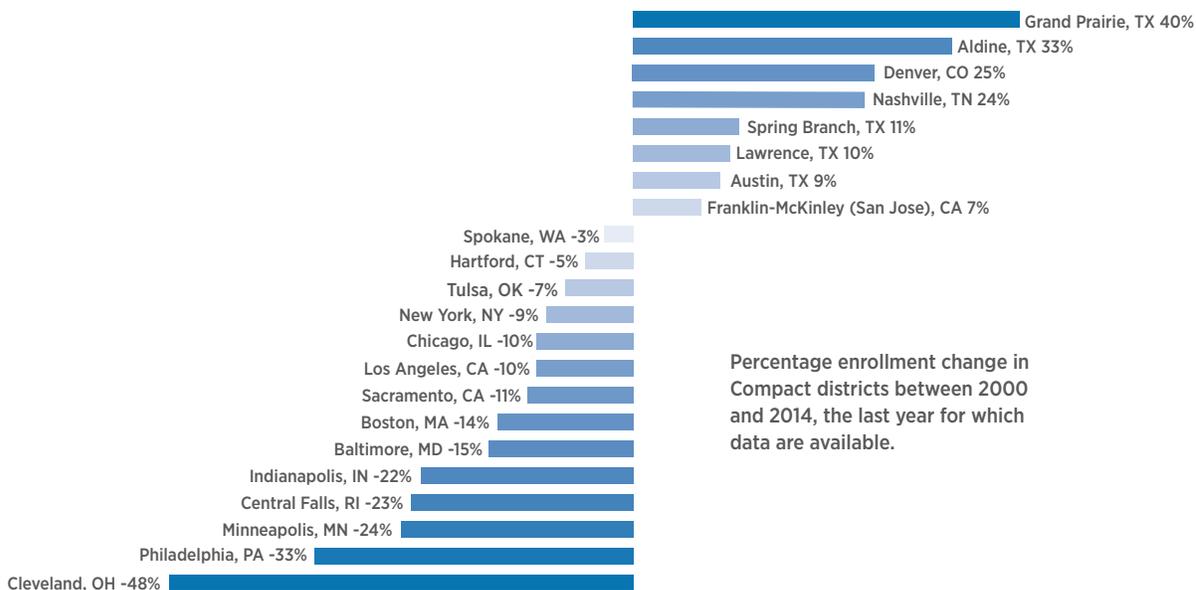
***Understanding what motivates district-charter collaboration is important: It provides a path for evaluating why some initiatives fail to make progress in achieving their goals and how collaborations may evolve over time.***

**TABLE 2. Collaboration Is More Difficult in Some Cities**

Factor	Result	Example cities
District enrollment loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduces district’s ability to compete</li> <li>• Makes district vulnerable to negative effects of competition</li> <li>• Reduces ability of district to offer resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cleveland</li> <li>• Philadelphia</li> <li>• Los Angeles</li> </ul>
Weak charter sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduces political desirability of cooperation</li> <li>• Weakens charter sector’s ability to help solve problems for district</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cleveland</li> <li>• Minneapolis</li> </ul>
Unfavorable community and board politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Undermines leadership commitment to collaboration</li> <li>• Increases risks association with cooperation for elected leaders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Austin</li> <li>• Nashville</li> <li>• Philadelphia</li> </ul>

**District enrollment loss.** Districts facing declining enrollment and other financial woes are necessarily more oriented toward self-preservation and less interested (or able) to offer bargaining chips that help to fuel collaborations. Of the 23 cities that established Compacts, nearly half (10) faced enrollment declines of 10 percent or more. District-charter collaboration initiatives in cities such as Philadelphia and Los Angeles have struggled to make progress in the face of mounting district deficits associated with enrollment losses and growing health and pension costs.<sup>14</sup> While in many cases, only a small portion of these enrollment losses are attributed to charter schools, the end result is the same: many districts are less willing to partner on initiatives that result in more students enrolling in charter schools. As a district leader told us, enrollment declines change the nature of competition to “zero sum,” making it much more difficult to offer up resources that could be used to enhance either sector’s competitive advantage. Some districts are able to overcome the challenges of increased competition, and in these cases, leadership is often an important part of the story. For example, the election of a pro-charter board in Los Angeles breathed life back into that city’s district-charter collaboration work. But there is little question that such positions are much harder for leaders to maintain in the face of a rapidly worsening fiscal situation. As one official in a high-growth city said, “[W]e could grow our way out of any fight [with charters].”

**FIGURE 1. Mounting Enrollment Losses in Compact Districts**



*Note: New Orleans represents a special case of district-charter collaboration: The district no longer operates any public schools and the vast majority of students are enrolled in charter schools, each of which represent their own local education agency (LEA). We exclude them here since district enrollment loss takes on a different meaning in this context compared to systems in which the district continues to operate traditional public schools.*

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Elementary and Secondary Education Information System, K-12 Public School Enrollment (2000 - 2014).*

**Weak charter sector.** High-performing nonprofit charter schools such as KIPP and Democracy Prep are not without controversy, but they enjoy broad support in large part because of their strong results with students and avoidance of public scandals stemming from corruption. But in many cities, the charter sector is dominated by for-profit schools with mediocre results or with a history of financial and political troubles. Under these circumstances, charter schools are unlikely to fit into the district’s strategy to improve access to high-quality schools, and even the leaders of sound charter schools can be vulnerable to “guilt by association.” Savvy leaders can work around these issues by being selective in the types of partnerships they initiate. For example, in Cleveland, Superintendent Eric Gordon believed that high-performing charter schools could help support the district’s broader turnaround strategy, so he limited the district’s work on collaboration to those charter schools that exhibited strong results for students.

**Unfavorable community and board politics.** In big city school districts, community politics is a constant constraint on what is possible. But district-charter collaborations face additional challenges. Charter schools have been caught up in larger national political conflicts about privatization and the relative balance of power between citizens, unions, private businesses, and government. Although the sector has historically enjoyed broad support from both Republicans and Democrats, in many cities opposition to charter schools is a litmus test for superintendent candidates and school board members. While observers often dismiss these debates as “adult politics” (and driven in large part by a proxy war with teachers unions), they also reflect deep disagreements about the desirability of choice and use of nongovernmental public services and can tap into middle class families’ worries about their children’s access to educational opportunity. Regardless of the reasons, unfavorable board politics and public opinion around the desirability of choice can impose substantial costs on districts that want to collaborate, thereby weakening their commitment to such efforts. Deeply progressive cities such as Austin, Nashville, and Los Angeles had varying levels of commitment to collaboration, but large and small efforts to support more coordination were derailed in the face of school board opposition and public debate over the merits of charter schools.

None of these factors are deterministic in the sense that their presence or absence provides any guarantees of success or failure. Politics eludes prediction. Across the cities studied, exceptions to the rule were common. For example, in Austin and Nashville, better cooperation between the sectors has stalled out, despite those districts’ growing enrollments, in part because charters were

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successfully cast by opponents as cogs in a larger privatization scheme, an unfavorable positioning in deeply “blue” cities. Meanwhile, Chicago made steady progress on better cooperation between the sectors, even in the face of mounting deficits and declining enrollment, in part because the city schools have long been controlled by mayors who have embraced charters as partners. Declining enrollment, a weak charter sector, or unfavorable community politics makes district-charter collaboration hard, but some leaders are able to make progress in spite of these constraints by driving hard bargains and building a base of political support.

## The “Sweet Spot”: Finding Success in District-Charter Collaboration

Viewed in light of the constraints, it is easy to become pessimistic about the prospects for district-charter collaboration. Although the benefits to students, families, and taxpayers can be substantial, collaborations can expose both sectors to new risks and require financial, organizational, and political investments to be successful. Indeed, of the 23 initiatives tracked, nearly half (10) lost ground over the course of the sectors’ work together. Collaboration initiatives in other cities range from fledging efforts, such as cross-sector work in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, to introduce personalized learning in tandem in district and charter schools, to major initiatives, such as Indianapolis’ Innovation Network where charter schools become part of the district’s own portfolio. But none are so institutionalized as to be immune from the challenges discussed in this report. A school board election, superintendent transition, or changing demographic forecasts could rapidly shift the fate of collaboration efforts.

The constraints that shape district-charter collaboration are unlikely to go away anytime soon, but supporters of better coordination between the sectors can take constructive steps toward ensuring that their work pays off.

**Understand how politics animates district-charter collaborations.** In the work of district-charter collaboration, it is easy to point fingers and blame stalled progress on unworthy “adult” interests. But successful collaborations ultimately hinge on navigating the competing motivations, values, and allegiances that adults in both sectors bring to the table. As this report makes clear, collaboration initiatives impose costs and generate benefits for both the district and charter sectors. These initiatives also touch upon competing values for public education that are unlikely to go away anytime soon. Understanding these factors is an essential first step before embarking on a joint venture.

**Recognize the give-and-take nature of collaboration.** It is a truism in politics and business to never expect something for nothing; the same holds true in district-charter collaborations. While staunch advocates for both districts and charters often decry compromise as a “weakness,” politics demands give-and-take negotiations. Collaborations are more likely to find success when the initiative offers both sides a “win,” or when the sectors find themselves aligned on the problem or share common values. As one district leader said, “[We] try to identify some of the pain points that both sides have that would be common ground for them to come together.” When common ground is lacking or mistrust runs deep, cooperation should start small and with initiatives that generate tangible benefits to both sectors. In studying district-charter collaborations, we came across numerous examples of savvy superintendents and charter leaders who understood the political nature of their work and sought to exploit it, rather than be constrained by it.

*Collaborations are more likely to find success when the initiative offers both sides a “win,” or when the sectors find themselves aligned on the problem or share common values.*

- In Denver, district leaders leveraged facilities as a bargaining chip in their negotiations over unified enrollment, thereby helping to gain the commitment of charter leaders who were initially reluctant to cede some of their optional autonomy over to district administrators.
- In Chicago, a charter leader leveraged his strong reputation among local charter leaders to unify a fragmented charter sector in support of creating a common school performance metric that allows an apples-to-apples comparison of all schools, both district and charter, so that families have the information they need to choose a school.

***Boundary spanners perform critical functions in district-charter collaboration, helping to foster mutual trust and reduce combativeness between the sectors.***

**Hire and leverage “boundary spanners.”** As CRPE has written about before, boundary spanners perform critical functions in district-charter collaboration, helping to foster mutual trust and reduce combativeness between the sectors.<sup>15</sup> If understanding the politics of district-charter collaboration is essential for success, then boundary spanners are critical to building that understanding.

- In the Spring Branch ISD outside of Houston, a former charter school leader who was hired by the district played a key role in helping to negotiate the SKY Partnership—a district-charter schools colocation initiative that placed two high-performing charter schools inside low-performing school district campuses.
- In Washington, D.C., Abigail Smith, who was hired as the Deputy Mayor for Education because of her experience in both district and charter schools, leveraged her deep ties to the city’s district and charter leaders to help gain buy-in on a unified application and lottery. Because both sides trusted her, Smith was able to bridge the divide between the sectors.

**Understand how “windows of opportunity” shape collaborations.** Although the constraints on district-charter collaboration are substantial, they are not unchanging. A new superintendent, school board, and even a scandal can shift collaboration dynamics, making them more or less likely to succeed. Leveraging leadership transitions and other moments in time can help to jump-start collaborations that have stalled out. They can also halt collaborations that have been in the works for years.

- In Baltimore, the hiring of Superintendent Andrés Alonso helped to spark new conversations about district-charter collaborations. The city’s 2010 Compact identified areas of joint work, including a new renewal process for district-authorized charter schools, sharing advocacy efforts, and a new district-sponsored office to serve and interact with charter schools.
- In Boston, negotiations over unified enrollment in the city broke down when local advocacy groups launched their campaign over an initiative to end the statewide cap on charter schools. Unified enrollment became tied up in the broader debate over the initiative, thereby making it untenable for the district to pursue the work—despite the substantial progress they had made in the months prior.

**Address issues that disincentivize district-charter collaborations.** Would-be collaborators can bring more political savvy to their work, but sometimes the barriers to district-charter collaborations have their roots in factors that even skilled leaders cannot control. District enrollment loss and weak charter authorizing may make collaborations difficult to initiate and sustain, as competition over students crowds out desires to better coordinate services for families. States can support district-charter collaborations by addressing weaknesses in the charter sector and eliminating fiscal mandates that make it difficult for districts to improve their operations in the face of **declining enrollment**. Over the longer term, states might also consider tackling some of the larger structural issues that disincentivize better cooperation between the sectors. This includes eliminating state rules that require districts to fund charters out of district line items—a practice that magnifies the effects of charter school enrollments on districts’ budgets—and crafting longer-term governance solutions to coordinating services between the sectors (rather than relying upon voluntary cooperation alone).

- In Ohio, the state legislature worked to strengthen oversight of the charter sector, which is dominated by poorly performing for-profits, by authorizing an automatic closure law for poor performance and rating authorizers based on their quality control practices. But these actions still left many districts awash in low-performing schools, with few incentives to better coordination on issues such as school siting, quality control, and enrollment.

**Do not rely on outsider support alone.** State and national advocates and policymakers can offer resources and support, but they can also create conflicts with community stakeholders and be forced out of town. National philanthropies in particular should proceed cautiously in inserting themselves into local education debates, as their presence can help mobilize opposition forces that view them as outsiders and associated with larger ideological agendas.

- In Newark, support for district-charter collaboration was imported. Authority came from New Jersey through a takeover of the district, leadership from New York City, and money from California. Local political figures who earlier might have disagreed about many things found it to their advantage to unite against people and actions imposed from the outside, including key collaboration initiatives such as unified enrollment.

**Broaden political support base.** To sustain collaborations over time and work toward more ambitious initiatives, build a broader base of support. Bargaining and horse trading are important but ultimately limited tools because there is only so much either sector can offer the other. Collaborations that rely exclusively on a supportive superintendent or school board are unlikely to be sustained during leadership transitions (e.g., New York City, Baltimore). Instead, supporters of district-charter collaboration should leverage local influencers—mayors, city councils, local philanthropy, and nonprofits that support youth—who can persuade

*Supporters of district-charter collaboration should leverage local influencers—mayors, city councils, local philanthropy, and nonprofits that support youth—who can persuade others to support better cooperation.*

others to support better cooperation. These stakeholders can be powerful allies who can help gain the support of others and weather the storm when superintendents turn over, school boards become less friendly, and the costs/benefits of collaboration shift. These local leaders are less likely to be associated with the ideological absolutism that characterizes national debates and that makes compromise much more difficult.<sup>16</sup> And they are better poised to support coalition building among initially reluctant stakeholder groups.<sup>17</sup>

- In Denver, superintendents Michael Bennet and Tom Boasberg carefully worked to build middle class support for their reform agendas, which included several high-profile district-charter collaboration initiatives. Both leaders proceeded more incrementally than some of their peers in other cities, closing fewer schools, focusing new charter schools on underserved neighborhoods that did not threaten existing power bases, and leaving key middle class advantages (e.g., neighborhood schools in affluent areas) alone.

## Conclusion

These are commonsense observations, but district and charter leaders often run afoul of them. They may enter collaborations believing that good intentions are enough to carry the heavy weight of increased coordination, as we observed in more than a dozen cities studied for this report. Or, they may believe fool-heartedly that being “right” makes them likely to come out on top. For all that good ideas and principled leadership bring, they are not enough to sustain collaborations in the face of politics. This report has sought to surface some new ideas about how politics shapes collaborations—for good or ill—and what steps charter and district leaders can take if they want to see collaboration initiatives succeed. Nothing written here offers any guarantees of success (or failure). That’s the thing about politics—it is always changing. But one thing is clear—leaders who bring greater political savvy to their work enhance their likelihood of translating their good ideas into reality.

## Endnotes

1. See, for example, Helen Gym, “Philadelphia School Partnership pushes for private management of student placement,” *The Notebook* blog, *Philadelphia Public Schools*, October 24, 2013.
2. In 2016, CRPE convened a group of stakeholders to discuss enrollment declines in traditional school districts and their implications for charter schools. See *Better Together: Ensuring Quality District Schools in Times of Charter Growth and Declining Enrollment* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).
3. For one example, see Paul T. Hill and Ashley E. Jochim, *A Democratic Constitution for Public Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
4. Involuntary collaborations are also possible, as when a higher level of government (e.g., a state) requires cross-sector coordination on a particular issue.
5. The district-charter compacts signed by the 23 cities are [available on the CRPE website](#).
6. Jeffrey R. Henig et al., *Putting Collective Impact in Context*, working paper (New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University, Department of Education Policy and Social Analysis, 2015).
7. Priscilla Wohlstetter, Joanna Smith, and Courtney L. Malloy, “Strategic Alliances in Action: Toward a Theory of Evolution,” *Policy Studies Journal* 33, no. 3 (August 2005): 419-442.
8. Most cross-sector initiatives, even those that seek to include government agencies that ostensibly have similar missions and leadership, also face battles over turf, status, and sometimes funding. However, few tap as directly into competitive concerns such as district-charter collaborations, in which the actions directly cause (rather than indirectly) loss of funding.
9. Sarah Yatsko et al., *District-Charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2013).
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, forthcoming 2018).
11. Political scientists speak of such evolutions in terms of policy feedback, or “policy as its own cause.” See Aaron Wildavsky, *Speaking Truth to Power: The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1979): 81.
12. Charter schools are sometimes viewed as a market reform in which school providers are disciplined by market incentives and immune from politics. But, as discussed by Henig et al. (2003) “service providers [are] hybrid actors who may pursue their interests not only by responding to market signals but also by engaging in political behavior designed to elicit government support or change the broad rules of the game in ways that provide them systematic advantages.” See Jeffrey R. Henig et al., 2003, “Privatization, Politics, and Urban Services: The Political Behavior of Charter Schools,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 25, no. 1 (February 2003).
13. See, for example, Justine S. Hastings and Jeffrey M. Weinstein, “Information School Choice, and Academic Achievement Evidence from Two Experiments,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 4 (November, 2007): 1373-1414.
14. As other CRPE researchers address in a recent paper on this topic, tackling these issues will not be easy but is possible via a “grand bargain” that offers temporary relief from the effects of enrollment loss in exchange for districts getting serious about structural reforms to legacy costs. See CRPE, *Better Together*, 2017.
15. Sarah Yatsko and Angela Bruns, *The Best of Both Worlds: School District-Charter Sector Boundary Spanners* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015).
16. Jeffrey R. Henig and Clarence N. Stone, “Rethinking School Reform: The Distractions of Dogma and the Potential for a New Politics of Progressive Pragmatism,” *American Journal of Education* 114, no. 3 (May 2008).
17. For examples of how district leaders have sought to build better coalitions, see Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim, “Street Savvy School Reform,” *Education Next*, August 9, 2016.

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## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families. Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools. CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through philanthropy, federal grants, and contracts.

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