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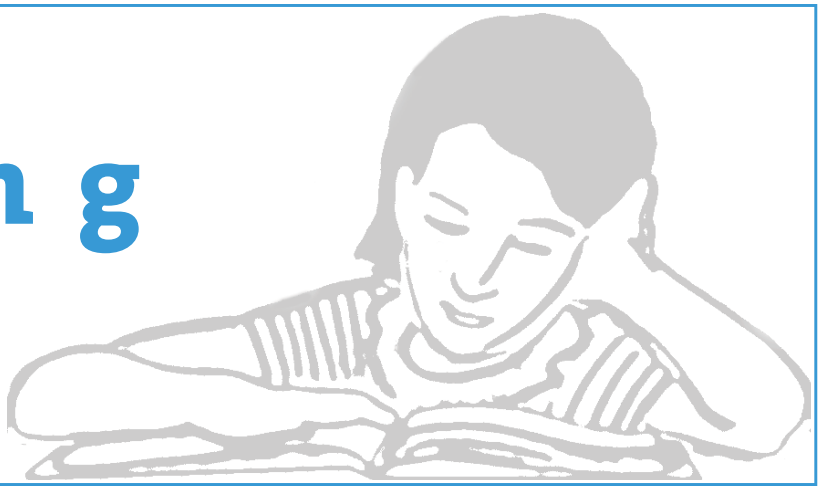

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Working With Private Partners to Manage the Market:

Collaborative Approaches to Charter School Oversight

Katharine Destler

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center on reinventing public education
University of Washington Bothell, 2101 North 34th Street, Suite 195, Seattle, WA 98103
206.685.2214 www.ncsrp.org

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Collaborative Approaches to Charter School Oversight

DRAFT

Katharine Destler
University of Washington

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This paper is part of a collection of nine working papers that provides research-based practical guidance to authorizers across the whole range of authorizer practices, from building supply and selecting applicants, through oversight and support, to intervening in and closing failing schools. Developed through CRPE's "Providing Public Oversight" research initiative in partnership with Public Impact.

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University of Washington Bothell, 2101 North 34th Street, Suite 195, Seattle, WA 98103
206.685.2214 www.ncsrp.org

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Fifteen years of charter school growth and the more recent No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law have directed public attention to the challenges of educational quality and school accountability. Central to each reform is the concept of performance accountability, both hierarchical accountability (through the state or school district) and market accountability (through parent choice). Both charters and NCLB assume that schools will perform better if we measure schools' outcomes rather than their compliance with rules. This represents a dramatic shift in regulatory focus from upfront mandates about the process of schooling to retrospective accountability for results.

Under the new framework, school districts not only oversee and run schools directly but also manage a "market" of nontraditional "suppliers", such as charter schools or other autonomous schools. This shift in regulatory and managerial emphasis reflects broader trends in the public sector, which emphasize performance accountability and the provision of services through autonomous providers as means to improve program efficiency and quality (Page 2007; Osborne and Plastrik 1997). Under such a system, highly performing schools reap rewards in the competitive marketplace, as increased student enrollment leads to increased school funding. Poor performers suffer and may eventually close, whether due to market pressures (failure to attract a sufficient number of students) or hierarchical accountability (closure by the district for failing to meet minimum outcome standards). Such an approach has been adopted in cities like New York, Indianapolis and Chicago, where vocal mayors and other district officials have put new school development at the center of broader reform efforts.

Yet, as scholars of both public and private sector contracting have noted, improved quality can be undermined by a number of factors, such as the complexity of the service provided and the robustness of the potential supply base (Gereffi, Humphrey and Sturgeon 1999; Behn and Kant 1999). Using contingent contracts and competitive pressures to leverage improvement only works if a district has the ability to turn to new providers. Districts have a mandate to serve all of their students. Absent quality providers, they may not be willing or able to close failing schools. This is why oversight organizations may need to invest in potential suppliers. In the face of a supply base that is weak or insecure, oversight organizations may also cater to suppliers' needs to foster the loyalty of the most capable performers (Monczka, Trent and Callahan 1993).

The tension between accountability and capacity-building is not unique to contracting environments. Bardach and Kagan (1982) have shown that many successful regulatory agencies simultaneously hold organizations responsible for minimum standards and act as consultants to help thrm improve their practice. But contracting, with its reliance on external providers to secure public goods, may be particularly vulnerable to breakdown. Brown and Potoski (2004) note that even in relatively straightforward services like trash collection, government agencies must actively "manage the market" to maintain competition between providers and ensure high-quality service.

These lessons are directly relevant to school districts seeking to develop charter schools and provide quality alternative options for students as mandated by NCLB. School districts cannot simply step back and wait for quality educational options to flood in. Such a laissez-faire approach is prone to backfire. At the front end, school districts that do not actively recruit new providers may not have enough quality schools to serve their students. Later on, a hands-off approach to recruiting may lead to undesirable dependence on current providers. Absent quality alternatives, school districts cannot afford to close poor performers.

To ensure that performance accountability can work in practice, school districts need to consciously intervene in the market and address the needs of providers in order to ensure that the highest-quality school applicants come to them. Specifically, school districts seeking to manage a system of decentralized schools should:

- Recruit multiple providers to maintain a robust supply base;
- Actively target the most capable providers;
- Build capacity of underdeveloped yet promising school providers;
- Provide professional support and other incentives to maintain supplier loyalty.

These tasks can be broken down into two primary responsibilities: recruitment of potential school operators and technical assistance to existing providers. In other words, thin markets require districts to focus on seeking out the most promising school providers and providing the support necessary to make sure that each school realizes its full potential. Some cities, like Chicago, have shown a willingness to take on these new roles. The Office of New Schools has worked directly to strengthen the supply base by recruiting outsiders and improving the capacity of insiders. In other words, it has sought to improve system performance by bringing in new, high-quality charter school options and providing support to their struggling district schools.

However, some charter school authorizers and innovating school districts have been reluctant to engage directly in recruitment or technical assistance efforts. This reluctance stems from both practical and philosophical concerns. Some lack the organizational capacity to recruit or provide additional support to autonomous schools. Others argue that they *should not* perform these functions. From their vantage point, meddling in the market either at the front end through recruitment, or later, as schools develop, can undermine the strict accountability function they were entrusted to serve (e.g. Merriman 2005). Thus even the most thoughtful or committed school overseers may find themselves in a bind. Developing a thriving pool of actual and potential school providers requires active intervention in the school supply market, but such action may be impossible or seem anathema to clear-cut performance accountability.

Our study of seven U.S. cities suggests a potential third way to resolve this dilemma. In virtually every city with strong charter school growth, one or more robust private charter organizations has emerged to recruit or provide technical assistance to prospective and/or young schools. We sought to gain insight about these private organizations developed, how they interacted with school overseers and the schools themselves, and how their

work could help districts "manage the market." In some cases, these organizations developed with the strong support of the district; in others, charter organizations had an arms-length or even an adversarial relationship with the charter school overseers in their jurisdiction. These charter support organizations also varied in the particular services that they offered. Some focused solely on recruitment, some were primarily school support organizations, and some offered a broad range of services.

The experiences of charter school overseers and charter school organizations highlight the reality that regulation, and performance contracting more specifically, is more than a binary relationship. A successful performance-contracting regime requires a robust supply base, something that may prove all too elusive in industries like charter schooling. By engaging in collaborative partnerships with private organizations, school overseers can increase their ability to manage the market. While the literature suggests that recruitment and capacity building are important to the strengthening of supply, government overseers may not be the only, or even the best, party to perform this task. While developing partnerships is not a seamless transaction, there are reasons to believe that doing so may be an effective way to build capacity both in individual schools and in the system as a whole.

Methodology

This paper focuses on charter school development efforts and the role of third-party organizations in seven cities: Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Washington, D.C, New Orleans and Los Angeles (Table 1). In the first section, I outline the barriers that hinder district charter school authorizers from actively managing the market of autonomous schools. Next, I explore the continuum of approaches taken by third party organizations and the range of relationships they foster both with the schools they support and with the charter school authorizers.

Table 1
Charter Authorizers and Private Third- Party Organizations by City

City	Charter Organizations	Organization's Origin
Chicago	Leadership for Quality Education *	Pre-Existing
	Renaissance 2010 Fund	District Impetus
Indianapolis	The Mind Trust	District Impetus
Los Angeles	California Charter School Association+	Grassroots
Milwaukee	TALC New Visions	External Grant
New Orleans	New Schools for New Orleans	Grassroots
	National Association for Charter School Authorizers	Grassroots
New York City	New York Center for Charter School Excellence	District Impetus
Philadelphia	Pennsylvania Coalition of Charter Schools+	Grassroots
Washington,	Friends of Choice in Urban Schools	Grassroots

D.C.	D.C Association of Chartered Public Schools	Grassroots
* no longer in operation	+ statewide organization	

To better understand the promise and challenges of districts partnering with third-party partners to recruit and assist new school providers, I limited my study to cities where robust private organizations had already developed: In some cases, these organizations developed from the grass roots; in other cases, they were created at the impetus of a government agency.

While they differ in their capacities, histories and institutional affiliations, the organizations in this study have several important qualities in common. First, each serves multiple schools, and none is associated with a single management or pedagogical approach. Next, each organization was relatively local in scope. While national organizations such as Building Excellent Schools and New Leaders for New Schools do play a role in boosting the quality and quantity of charter schools, their broad scope make them less able or willing to forge strong bonds with any one district or city. For that reason, we focused on organizations that had a city-wide or at most, a state-wide scope.

This paper draws from 31 semi-structured interviews (each approximately an hour long) with government personnel, third-party organization administrators and select charter school leaders and a review of the research literature and policy documents in each city. I focused on the following questions:

- Why may district authorizers be reluctant to actively manage the supply market?
- How do relationships between a charter organization and its district vary? What are the advantages and disadvantages of close relationships?
- What are the advantages and challenges of distributing responsibilities for accountability and supply development across institutional lines? Are certain responsibilities better suited to one organization than another?

My goal was to identify the roles played by third-party organizations in charter school development and oversight, and to identify factors that that made partnerships more effective.

Why may district authorizers be reluctant to manage the supply market?

Charter school authorizers seeking to recruit and/or provide support services to the schools in their jurisdiction face multiple barriers. The most significant of these are organizational capacity restraints and the reality or perception of conflicting interests.

First, many charter school authorizers have limited organizational resources and extensive oversight responsibilities. Most of the authorizing offices in our study, whether internal to the district, connected to another political body (e.g., the mayor's office) or

independent, are small operations with limited capacity. In some cases, the entire authorizing task is delegated to just one or a few individuals. Even larger operations typically have fewer than ten staff members. Moreover, oversight of autonomous schools is a complex job. Charter school authorizers are responsible for screening school applicants, monitoring schools' legal compliance, fielding parent and community feedback, defining and measuring educational outcomes, and making, communicating and implementing contract renewal decisions. As the papers in this series may clear, none of these is simple.

The sum of an authorizer's responsibilities coupled with limited organizational capacity suggests that even the most conscientious authorizers have little room in their schedules to recruit promising newcomers or provide technical assistance to support school improvement. As one authorizer observed, "The office has been so understaffed.[We are] buried under a mountain of paper, so our focus for the past year and a half has been getting the staff out in the schools, reviewing what's going on...Our work is a little more reactive than I would like it to be." Oversight of existing schools on its own is more than a full time job for many authorizing offices, which have failed to grow at the same pace as the schools they oversee. Barring a significant boost in their financial resources, authorizers may be wise not to overextend their obligations.

Beyond such pragmatic considerations, however, many argue that a school district or charter authorizer is ill-suited to recruit or provide assistance to the schools under its purview. Technical assistance and recruiting may run counter to districts' notions of fair play. Scholars of public sector contracting have pointed to the ways in which the government imperative for a fair process undermines efficient supply development (e.g., Kelman 2005). Evidence of this can be found in the charter school landscape as well. Some of the authorizers with whom we spoke avoided recruiting school providers altogether, concerned that such outreach would give some applicants an edge over others.[1] One explained, "The challenge is if we cultivate people to [start up a new school] and they have to come to us to apply, they're thinking, you'll approve us, and well, maybe yes, maybe no." Other cities, such as New Orleans, permitted recruiting but drew the line at application assistance. The rule as understood by private partners was "once you submit an application, don't talk to us." In many of these cases, authorizers worried about the *perception* of corruption as much as the *reality* of it. Thus they avoided recruitment and assistance even if they thought they could separate those from assessment and judge all applicants equally.

The growth of district run charter schools can present additional complications for school districts. Some district officials may perceive charter or contract schools as undesirable competition (Teske, Schneider and Cassese 2005). On the surface, one might expect charter schools to be a welcome supply channel for school districts struggling to educate all of their students. However, the political origins of charter schools—introduced as part

[1] Some of the districts that did engage in recruiting delegated that responsibility to a separate division. In Chicago, for example, the Mayor's office actively recruited providers, while the school district office and board reviewed applications.

of an explicit critique of traditional education and its embedded institutional interests (e.g., teachers' unions)— have led many district officials to view charters with suspicion if not outright hostility.

In a mixed system of autonomous and hierarchically-controlled schools, autonomous schools can present a material and a symbolic threat to the status quo. First, the consequence of the per-pupil funding equation in most states is that school districts suffer negative financial repercussions when students move from district-run to charter schools. Next, the public often interprets charter enrollment as a sign that a district is not serving its students well. For that reason, some charter school advocates have decried the entire notion of school district authorizers as similar to McDonalds overseeing Burger King (e.g. Finn 2003). Just as McDonalds has no interest in helping a rival enter a new market or improve its product, they argue, school districts have no motivation to boost the quantity or the quality of the charter schools in their jurisdiction.

Finally, some charter school authorizers resist providing technical assistance because they fear that doing so will breed (or retain) a compliance culture rather than true accountability for performance. As noted in the introduction, central to the charter school premise is the idea that schools should be held accountable for student outcomes. If an authorizer offers detailed technical assistance or prescribes a specific reform, the argument goes, schools will begin to equate "success" with following instructions. This, in turn, will muddy the waters when contract renewal time rolls around and schools face evaluation based on their student outcomes (Merriman 2005).

These barriers—insufficient organizational resources, a desire for clean accountability decisions and clear lines of responsibility, and a suspicion towards autonomous schools—can prevent even the most motivated authorizer from recruiting or offering assistance to boost the supply of quality providers.

A Diverse Field of Private Providers: How do the relationships between charter authorizers and third-party organizations vary?

To classify all of the relationships we witnessed as "partnerships" might imply a common operating philosophy or common managerial practices from one district to the next. This was not the case. In fact, the organizations we explored varied significantly in the focus of their operations and their relationship with both the authorizers in their jurisdiction and the schools that they served.

Scope of Services Offered to Schools:

As Table 2 indicates, not all third-party organizations managed the market in the same ways. The work performed by private organizations tended to fall into four stages of the charter school life cycle: recruitment and development of new talent or ideas; application support; incubation and start-up assistance; and ongoing assistance to schools in operation. Some organizations focused on a single stage of the charter life cycle, although most offered services that covered a range of stages.

Table 2:
Services Provided by Third-Party Providers

	Recruitment	Application Support	Startup/ Planning	Ongoing Support
Leadership for Quality Education		✓		
Renaissance 2010 Fund	✓	✓	✓	
The Mind Trust	✓			
California Charter School Association		✓	✓	✓
TALC New Visions	✓	✓		✓
New Schools for New Orleans	✓	✓		
New York Center for Charter School Excellence		✓	✓	✓
Pennsylvania Coalition of Charter Schools				✓
Friends of Choice in Urban Schools (FOCUS)	✓	✓		
D.C Association of Chartered Public Schools				✓

Five of the organizations (FOCUS, the Renaissance 2010 Fund, The Mind Trust, New Schools for New Orleans and TALC New Visions) we interviewed sought to recruit new school providers and/or develop new educational concepts. These organizations varied in both their recruitment focus and the extent of the services provided. FOCUS, Renaissance 2010 and New Schools for New Orleans all sought to boost the school market directly, by attracting new charter or contract schools.

The Mind Trust and TALC New Visions took a slightly more indirect approach, providing substantial funding to help promising educators develop innovative ideas. At TALC New Visions, these ideas were housed in concrete proposals for new small schools, but the emphasis appeared to be on new approaches. Explained one official, "part of the philosophy around here was, we're trying to support these different concepts, but they might not make it. And that's okay, because they don't get all the funding up front. Then we go through and try to find others." For TALC New Visions, innovation was more important than feasibility per se. Leaders there were willing to risk funding schools that never opened in order to ensure that the programs expanded educators' sense of what was possible.

The Mind Trust's activities were one more step removed from charter school development. Through a venture fund, it reached out to organizations like Teach for America, hoping to bring new teachers and new ideas to the city. It also began awarding

a two-year fellowship for educational "entrepreneurs"—those with new visions of education that they hoped to incubate and expand. While neither of these projects was directly tied to charter schools, organizational leaders believed that they had the potential to increase the supply of quality options indirectly. By expanding the city's intellectual capital, The Mind Trust hoped to generate ideas that could be used by prospective school leaders.

Just as they varied in their goals, the recruiting organizations varied in the extent of their efforts. Not every organization provided the same level of recruiting. FOCUS, an organization committed to building the supply of charter schools in Washington, D.C., recruited primarily through traditional means, offering information sessions to attract local talent and networking with national programs through conferences and other venues. Renaissance 2010 and New Schools for New Orleans were somewhat more proactive and expansive in their approach, seeking out nationally- recognized school providers and visiting other cities to identify promising models.

The next stage in the charter life cycle is the application process. In addition to recruiting, FOCUS and the Renaissance 2010 Fund also provided application support. New York's Center for Charter School Excellence (NYCCSE) and the California Charter Association also provided these services. Application support included both general workshops that covered key elements of school planning and the charter application and more substantive feedback, a service that was often limited to the most promising applications. As one organization leader explained, "the high-value ticket on that basic membership is petition review, where we vet the petitions against both our own quality standards, NACSA standards[2], the state board of education's model petition, and the local requirements as well. And they get back really heavily annotated feedback for them to follow." Several school leaders reinforced that impression, noting hat application reviews were helpful for the ultimate success of their proposals and of their schools.

Despite general acknowledgement that the planning phase is critical to new school success, few organizations offered guidance and resources to newly approved schools. The leader of one new charter school in D.C. noted, "Writing the application—this is the easy part—125 pages, but on paper. Now you go from writing fabulous ideas to implementing them right. The only factor is *you.* Implementing them is much harder [than planning them out]." Recognizing the challenges of implementation and the isolation experienced by many school founders, three of the partner organizations in our study, the Renaissance 2010 Fund, California Charter Association, and NYCCSE, offered planning grants or other resources to schools so they could better bridge the period between charter approval and a school's opening day. It's worth noting, however, that in case, the services provided were *selective*—only the most promising schools received substantive planning support.

[2] The National Association of Charter School Authorizers, a professional association of charter school overseers, has issued a list of school selection criteria.

Other organizations focused on later stages of the charter school lifecycle. Such support was largely found in the charter associations (Pennsylvania, California and D.C.). For example, the Coalition of Pennsylvania Charter Schools, as a membership organization, sought to respond to the self-identified needs of its schools when deciding what workshops to run. California's charter association went a step further, developing a Charter Quality Institute that target schools in their first years. For the most part, these services were more informally organized than were procedures for recruitment and application support.

Relationships between Authorizers and Third-Party Organizations:

As Table 3 indicates, the third-party organizations in this study fell along a wide continuum in their relationship with charter school authorizers, from intimate partnerships to distant or even hostile interactions.

Table 3:
Relationship between Charter Overseers and Third-Party Organizations

Intimate	Neutral	Distant
Mind Trust Leadership for Quality Education Renaissance 2010 Fund New York Center for Charter School Excellence	FOCUS DC Association of Public Charter Schools TALC New Vision New Schools for New Orleans	California Charter Association Pennsylvania Coalition of Charter Schools

In some cases, the reality or perception of market competition between charter and district schools undermined the development of close relationships. At one extreme was a charter association leader who decried any formal partnership with an authorizer, suggesting that to do so was to violate his role as an advocate for the schools in his member organization. Any collaboration with a district or authorizer in reviewing school quality would be entirely inappropriate, he argued, criticizing the charter association of a neighboring state that had publicly supported closure of some member schools. While not completely ruling out the possibility of informal collaboration in the future, he also expressed little confidence that the authorizer in his jurisdiction would act as a good-faith partner. His hostility to the notion of partnerships was thus grounded in both principled and practical reasons. He believed that a charter association's excessively close bonds with an authorizer would undermine its relationship with schools. Schools would be less likely to trust an advocacy organization if they believed it had strong ties to the overseer that could shut the school down. Beyond that, this charter school association leaer cited the impossibility of partnerships in his city given the particular political powers at play.

At the other end of the spectrum were organizations like Indianapolis's Mind Trust, which had been founded and staffed by former members of the Mayor's charter school office. Its ties to the authorizer ran deep. Charter school officials had recognized the

need for a more active approach to building supply capacity. Rather than performing that role directly (in large part because of the philosophical concerns outlined in the earlier section), leaders decided to "spin off" an independent educational development organization. The CEO and chief operating officer (COO) of the organization had previously held posts as the director and assistant director of the charter school office respectively and the Mayor served on the organization's board of directors. These factors contributed to a strong alignment of mission and organizational culture more broadly, and the Mayor's participation in the organization's governance ensured a certain level of alignment in new activities.[3]

The other organizations in our study fell somewhere in between these two extremes. NYCCSE defined partnership with the city government as part of its founding mission, although the staffing links were not as strong as those at The Mind Trust. Renaissance 2010 had a similar relationship. FOCUS had more of an arms-length relationship with authorizers. The leadership there expressed a willingness to work or communicate with "quality authorizers" (and in fact had engaged in collaborative strategic planning) but consciously avoided excessively close ties and refused outright to work with officials that it perceived as overly political or otherwise incapable of objective oversight.

Despite the variations outlined above, one common pattern emerged. Virtually all the third-party organizations eschewed formal, contractual relationships with school districts or authorizers. As a result, almost all the collaboration we found was the result of voluntary, informal arrangements and/or mutual understandings. The advantages and disadvantages of such an approach will be discussed later in the paper.

Relationship between Schools and Third-Party Organizations:

A potential advantage of third-party organizations is their ability to foster close ties with the schools in a district. These organizations varied in the extent to which they sought out and established close relationships with particular schools. While they greatest determinant of the relationship between a third-party provider and a school was the organization's internal mission, external factors also played a role.

Table 4 shows the range of relationships between the schools and third-party organizations. The relationships differed in two dimensions—intimacy and availability. Intimacy reflects the extent to which private organizations felt a sense of loyalty or obligation to particular schools; availability indicates whether services were universally provided or exclusive in nature.

Table 4:
Relationship of Schools and Third-Party Providers

[3] In November 2007, the incumbent Mayor, Bart Peterson, was defeated for re-election. He remains on Mind Trust's board, and it is not clear whether the close ties between the organization and the Mayor's office will continue.

		Intimacy		
		Arms-Length	*Loyal to Charter Schools as a System*	*Advocate for Particular Schools*
Availability	*Selective Services*	Ren 2010 The Mind Trust Leadership for Quality Education	FOCUS NYCCSE New Schools for New Orleans	TALC/New Visions California Charter School Association
	Universal Services			DCACPS Pennsylvania Coalition of Charter Schools

On one end of the spectrum were organizations that had a rather distant stance towards individual schools. For example, like its predecessor, Leadership for Quality Education, the Renaissance 2010 Fund positioned itself as a disinterested evaluator. Its role was not to advocate for any single school or group of schools—rather its purpose was to remain objective and be a strong voice for high-quality standards. Such a stance was most common in organizations whose mission was quasi-governmental.

Other organizations saw themselves as advocates for charter schools or school decentralization in general, while not necessarily tying their allegiance to any particular school. FOCUS, for example, was dedicated to developing the supply of autonomous schools, and sought, at least indirectly, to promote changes in district practice. However, it did not advocate for any particular school, and its formal relationship with schools ended once a charter had been approved. NYCCSE played a similar role in New York City, though it provided services for later stages in the charter life cycle.

Finally, a third group was charter school organizations, many of which emphasized their responsibilities as member organizations. Organizations like the D.C. Association of Chartered Public Schools (DCACPS) and the Pennsylvania Coalition of Charter Schools (PCCS) not only provided technical assistance to schools, but also engaged in political and legal advocacy to generate laws and other institutions conducive to charter school success. Such a stance implied continuing relations with schools and, within some limits, a commitment to school survival.

If third-party associations are going to play a support role for schools in a district, not just the quality of the relationship matters; accessibility of services can also be important. The organizations also varied in their availability, or the extent to which they targeted or rationed their support. Some charter organizations, such as the Pennsylvania Coalition, provided a base level of assistance to any school that requested it. This stance was common in member organizations. They made resources available to all current and prospective members (e.g. applicant schools).

Others were more selective in targeting their support. One leader estimated that his organization provided additional support to approximately 25 percent of preliminary applicants. Not every organization saw availability as an either/or proposition. FOCUS, Renaissance 2010, NYCCSE, New Schools for New Orleans and the California Charter Association set up a two-tiered system where basic services were provided to everyone and more extensive resources were limited to the most promising parties.

"Selective" third-party organizations provided material, informational and symbolic resources to schools. For example, both the Renaissance 2010 Fund and New Schools for New Orleans offered incubation grants—money and other tangible resources to help approved schools plan and prepare for their opening day. Yet money was not the only asset that third-party organizations could provide. The strong success rate of school applicants that had worked with organizations such as FOCUS, the California Charter Association and NYCCSE suggests that their technical assistance advantaged prospective schools that worked with a partner over those who had applied on their own. The reasons were both substantive and symbolic. Organizations worked with prospective school founders to help them improve the content of their applications. But it also seems clear that a respected organization's "seal of approval" meant something to authorizers. One staff member explained, "Schools like to [mention in their] application that they've worked with us and that we've helped build their team. And if they've received a planning grant from us, that is an indicator to an authorizer that they've done significant work to receive funding." By choosing which schools to support, organizations provided an initial screen and signaled quality to authorizers. This signaling power was an important part of the service they provided both to the schools and charter school authorizers.

Collaboration between Partner Organizations:

Washington, D.C. was the one city we studied that had multiple third-party organizations involved in direct assistance to charter schools. This case offered limited but real evidence of collaborative planning, if not out-right coordination of efforts.
Three factors make Washington, D.C. a particularly interesting case in point: 1) the relatively large proportion of charter schools in the city; 2) the robustness of third-party organizations and civic capacity more generally; and 3) the institutional separation of charter school oversight from the school district at large.

Washington, D.C. was originally a city with two official charter authorizers. Following the D.C. Board of Education's voluntary abdication of authorizing authority, the D.C. Public Charter School Board took on responsibility for overseeing all charter schools in the city. The Board is publicly accountable yet politically insulated—board members are nominated by the Secretary of Education and selected by the D.C. mayor. This insulation helped it overcome some of the barriers to technical assistance outlined above. For example, because the Public Charter School Board does not directly run schools, it is not likely to share the school district's sense of competition with charter schools. Concerns about organizational capacity and role clarity, however, prompted it to consider the appropriate division of labor for a range of oversight tasks. Working with FOCUS and

DCACPS, The Public Charter School Board began to identify needs in the charter school community and to delegate responsibility for those services to specific third-party organizations, working with them as partners in school oversight and support. In the process, it offered feedback to the private partner organizations and solicited advice about its application and renewal procedures in return.

Discussion

The experience of charter school authorizers and third-party organizations holds lessons that are relevant for school districts seeking to adopt performance accountability systems in the face of limited capacity at the district or school level. This section highlights some of the general patterns found in the cases reviewed and points out the benefits, risks and challenges to a partnership approach.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of close relationships? Are certain responsibilities better suited to one organization than to another?

Table 5 maps third-party organizations' relationships with charter school authorizers onto their relationship with the schools that they served.

Table 5
Relationship of Third-Party Providers to Charter Authorizers and Schools

		Relationship to Charter Authorizer		
		Intimate	**Neutral**	**Distant**
Relationship to Schools	**Advocate for Particular Schools**		DCACPS TALC New Vision	PCCS CCA
	Loyal to Charter Schools as a System	NYCCSE	FOCUS New Schools for New Orleans	
	Arms-Length	LQE, Renaissance 2010 The Mind Trust		

To some extent, organizations faced a tradeoff between close relationships with schools and close relationships with authorizers or school district officials. However, a close relationship with government officials did not preclude close relationships with individual schools. For example, DCACPS sought to both represent its members' interests and collaborate actively with the Public Charter School Board. Similarly, New York's Center for Charter Excellence provided detailed support to the most promising school applicants even as it had a very close relationship with city school officials. Of

note is the absence of any organizations that maintained distance both from schools and from authorizers. Clearly this is a context where relationships matter.

What are the advantages, challenges and risks of distributing responsibilities for accountability and supply development across institutional lines?

Third-party organizations appear to contribute to the growth or quality of autonomous schools. Four of the districts with the strongest records of charter school growth—— New York, Chicago, New Orleans and Washington, D.C. (Page and Destler 2007)—also had the most active third-party organizations, whether recruiting new schools or providing informational and monetary support to new providers. In each case, the organizations worked collaboratively with charter school authorizers, albeit to different degrees. It is not clear whether the robustness of partnership organizations is a cause or an effect of charter school growth. On the one hand, these partner organizations clearly play a key role in finding new providers and preparing them to write successful applications. At the same time, increased scale—whether largely because of market demand, in New Orleans and Washington, D.C., or because of direct governmental initiatives in Chicago and New York—itself increases the complexity of school oversight and fuels demand for support organizations. Most likely, the relationship between quality supply and private partnerships is a self-reinforcing one. The growth of private organizations both results from and contributes to the scaling up of performance accountability and alternate providers.

Benefits of the Partnership Approach

By working with partners, school districts can establish clear role expectations and lines of accountability. By delegating responsibility for recruitment and capacity-building to third-party organizations, overseers maintain a critical distance even as they provide resources to make sure that essential functions are served. Describing the stance of one charter authorizer, a third-party organization leader noted, "they're open about what they're looking for in their screening process, but they're also kind of hands-off and they say, you give us the final product, anything before that, go see an assistance group for, which is the work that we do. I think the positive part of that is that they can remain unbiased in which groups they [select to open new schools]." By clearly defining and limiting its role, districts can preserve the integrity of the selection and the contract renewal process.

Working with a third-party organizations can also enhance school districts' administrative capacity. Both districts and private associations benefit from clear missions. The district, faced with limited resources, can focus on its core responsibility—the evaluation of potential and actual schools. Private organizations, in turn, benefit from the partnership approach because they can tap into the knowledge of district officials without having to exclusively serve the district's interests. And the learning does not only go in one direction. Local community groups can help districts build political support for new schools and direct them to local talent, including prospective school

leaders. Finally, private organizations can link school districts to school providers in other communities. For example, New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) played an important role in recruiting nationally recognized charter management organizations and connecting them to interested local parties. NSNO is particularly well equipped to perform this function because most of its senior management has experience working with alternate school providers in other parts of the country.

Some of the above responsibilities could be performed by a subunit within the district office. However, working with third party organizations, rather than housing all responsibilities within a single office, allows for greater flexibility in responding to school needs. An engaged district official can identify new strategic objectives from year to year and then select the best organization to help achieve those objectives. This has been the strategy of the DC Public Charter School Board. Flexibility—the ability to commit resources where they are most needed without investing in large, permanent programs--is particularly important given resource constraints.

Finally, the partnership approach can promote information sharing and may improve the quality of individual schools. Like school districts, third-party organizations are connected to school networks and community organizations. As a result, they can foster ties between schools that struggle and those that have successfully confronted similar problems or to community resources that can provide organizational support. The advantage of third-party organizations is that they are separated from the accountability process. Schools subject to a performance contract understandably resist admitting their weaknesses to an oversight body that has the power to issue sanctions or cancel their contracts entirely. In contrast, partner organizations can serve as "critical friends" and offer honest feedback. Noting the advantage of autonomous support organizations in providing feedback to struggling schools, one authorizer noted, "we never go on those [site] visits; it helps [the third-party organization] have more credibility with the schools, and I think it makes the schools more willing to accept their conclusions."

When districts and partners have close relationships, districts can channel both ideas and feedback to schools through a third party. One leader of a charter development organization noted that districts coach applicants "indirectly, because they share with us…the things they are looking for, the elements of strong applications, just informally, through our relationship." The partner organization's close ties to both an authorizer and to the schools that it serves allow it to act as a mediator between parties whose interests are overlapping but not synonymous. Partner organizations' institutional independence also enables them to act as political advocates for charter schools that seek to overcome legal and policy barriers, a role that may be uncomfortable or inappropriate for government officials.

Challenges and Risks to the Partnership Approach:

Most of the third-party organizations focused their efforts on recruitment and application or startup support. Ongoing support for established schools, while not entirely absent, was far less common and less well developed. Several factors may explain this trend.

First, this focus may reflect the perceived need of school providers themselves. Schools in the planning or early operational stages likely need greater support than those that have developed a track record. Alternately, this emphasis may represent a strategy of prevention on the part of charter school authorizers or third-party organizations. Recognizing the high costs of school reconstitution and closure, some authorizers have cited the need to identify problems early, or prevent them altogether, rather than waiting for the charter renewal decision. Finally, this emphasis may simply reflect the state of the field. Most of the charter schools in operation are young; as the charter school movement matures, we may see more organizations targeting assistance to "middle-aged" schools—those approaching renewal or facing contract termination for poor performance. Regardless of the cause, an exclusive focus on prospective or new schools may limit the ability of partnerships to sustain high quality at the system level. As Lake and Squires (2008) have found, while raising standards (or improving performance) for new schools can have a positive effect on charter school performance, the uncertainties surrounding school performance prevent even the most conscientious district overseers from screening out all risk. Thus, any effort to create a sustainable high-quality system must address the needs of schools in "mid-life" as well as those in infancy.

The partnership approach is not without risk. Many of the districts in our study turned to outside partners because they lacked the internal organizational capacity to expand their operations. Yet private organizations themselves often have limited organizational capacity. Several of the third-party organizations that we interviewed said that limited staff and funding prevented them from expanding the services they provided to schools. To reap the full benefits of collaboration, districts may need to invest in their partners' capacity, an investment that may prove financially or politically difficult, and that could undermine third-party organization's autonomy.

Next, organizational autonomy and sectoral differences can inhibit full collaboration. Even absent outright adversarial relationships, private organizations are likely to have institutional interests that are distinct from those of the district overseer. Disagreements about what constitutes "quality" or sufficient improvement in the case of a struggling school may cause tension between a government overseer and a third-party organization. Furthermore, districts and private organizations may have conflicting organizational cultures and different expectations about what constitutes quality service on the administrative end. Sandfort (1994) has shown how structural differences across sectors undermine collaboration between organizations. This in turn, could potentially damage the relationship between a private organization and the schools it serves. Absent evidence that support organizations and district overseers are on the same page, schools may doubt the value of the services provided.

Conversely, just like contracting systems more generally, a district's close ties with thid-party organizations may lead to political backlash. Private organizations are, by definition, less publicly accountable than public agencies. This may lead some to doubt whether they are truly committed to the public interest. In Chicago, for example, the Renaissance 2010 Fund's close ties to local business elites fueled charges that city leaders have become beholden to corporate leaders intent on privatizing public education.

Similar criticism has been found in New Orleans, where opponents point out that many of the prominent support organizations, like the National Association of Charter School Authorizers and NSNO, are led by people outside of New Orleans and question whether outside experts know what is best for the city. Regardless of whether such criticisms are valid, district overseers must consider the political repercussions in order to establish sustainable change. This suggests that districts should forge partnerships with multiple parties, considering not only technical capacity but also community status and political ties. One authorizer in our study specifically noted the value of community organizations in creating a more welcoming environment for new schools.

Next, informal partnerships (as opposed to contractual agreements) are, by their definition, somewhat tenuous in nature. It remains to be seen whether loose ties can be sustainable over the long term. Absent formal contracts, district overseers and organizational leaders are likely to develop contradictory expectations of the others' role and responsibilities. And, as charter schools expand and mature within a particular district, third-party organizations may find that their initial roles become obsolete. That was the case in England, where the Ministry of Education worked to develop performance accountability in its high schools. The Ministry sought out the help of an independent organization, the Specialist Schools Trust, to recruit schools for the program. As the program expanded, the need for recruitment diminished and, in response, the Specialist Schools Trust evolved into a membership organization focused on professional development and school improvement. Whether third-party organizations in the United States follow a similar trajectory depends on the flexibility and capacity of both the organizations themselves and their government partners.

Similarly, districts face the risk that the partner organizations themselves may not last forever. Funded by an outside grant, TALC New Vision was scheduled to disband in 2008, when its mandate expired and its funding dried up. Other organizations, like Chicago's Leadership for Quality Education, disbanded as a result of shifting priorities of the school district. One authorizer noted, "When you're relying on outside experts, there is a concern – for long term sustainability… [that they are not] going to be around forever…if they were in this office, and we created a department of charter schools, that would probably be around for the foreseeable future. [By contrast,] organizations come and go, and people who are driving those organizations can come and go more freely." The tenuous nature of private organizations can hurt districts in two ways. First, excessive staff turnover can impede communication both with districts and with member schools. Informal partnerships are relational in nature; their success and stability may depend on connections between individuals rather than structural ties. These connections are difficult to maintain if personnel change from year to year. Next, to the extent that the technical assistance and recruitment activities become essential components of successful performance accountability, school districts could suffer critical setbacks if a key partner organization itself goes out of business.

Finally, as Smith and Lipsky (1993) have argued, private organizations that choose to partner extensively with government agencies may endanger their own autonomy and sense of mission. This fear was expressed by some of the private organizations in our

study. To closely tailor their technical assistance to the priorities of the district overseer, for example, organizations may have to diverge from their core values or definitions of quality instruction or management. For their part, third party organizations may need to "diversify" their programs, seeking out other sources of funding and/or running certain programs internally, to ensure that they maintain an identity distinct from their government partners.

Conclusion

Performance accountability in education depends on a robust supply pool of quality providers. School districts that have a limited number of options are unlikely to impose necessary sanctions or to close down poorly performing schools. Both quality and quantity matter; pure market-based approaches have not been sufficient to raise the quality of education, and so school districts may need to "manage the market" in order for performance accountability to function effectively at large scale.

To boost quantity, districts may need to actively recruit promising applicants, whether local talent or established national providers. To improve quality, they may need to provide substantive technical assistance to both prospective and existing schools. Some school districts, like Chicago, have begun to engage in these practices, yet many face considerable logistical and philosophical barriers to expanding their role.

These findings suggest that public-private partnerships can be a useful tool for districts that seek to expand their oversight capacity and maintain clear lines of accountability. Housing responsibility for recruitment and/or technical assistance in independent organizations enables those organizations to develop core competencies in particular oversight tasks, and can help districts maintain a critical distance from individual schools in order to avoid becoming beholden to any particular one. Partnerships enable districts to expand their organizational capacity in a flexible manner, so that they respond to changing needs of the schools or the system at large.

Ultimately, managing partnerships between government agencies and independent organizations requires a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, both the organizations themselves and the schools that they serve benefit from close coordination between districts and third-party organizations. For example, application support will be more efficient if the organization providing guidance has a clear understanding of the district's selection criteria and strategic priorities. At the same time, virtually all of the organizations and the charter authorizers we interviewed emphasized the importance of organizational autonomy—both to preserve their freedom of action and to avoid creating a perception of favoritism or an unfair process. Clear roles are important—schools need to know whether an organization ultimately represents their interests or those of the district.

Four of the cities with the most robust systems of charter and/or alternative schools—New Orleans, Chicago, New York City, and Washington, D.C.—also had the most active partnerships. And, in each case, the authors worked consciously to align their partners'

practice with their strategic goals. In isolated cases, coordination was formalized with a contract. More often, coordination was developed through frequent communication and informal understanding. Private organizations responded positively to school districts that they perceived as open to charter schools and thoughtful in their evaluation criteria. Through their actions, thus, school districts sent signals about their reliability as partners to school support organizations.

Several of the challenges inherent to public-private partnerships suggest that both districts and private organizations would do well to cultivate multiple partners with overlapping responsibilities. Here the experience of Washington, D.C., is instructive, where the Public Charter Board has cultivated relationships with multiple private organizations. In DC, this relationship has helped to shield both the public board and the third-party organizations from political backlash and accusations of favoritism. This experience suggests that relationships among multiple organizations can allow each of them to focus on discrete tasks, such as recruitment or technical assistance. And it could also provide some level of protection to school districts in the case that one of its partner organizations folds or ceases to work with the city. Finally, overlapping partnerships may foster the sharing of new ideas in a way that truly enables innovation to spread.

The value of multiple partnerships must be weighed against the value of close relationships between districts and third-party organizations. The experiences of Chicago, New York, and New Orleans highlight the value of local community ties and close communication between government officials and private organizations. National school supply and resource organizations have their place; however, for new schools to flourish, at least in the initial stages, school districts benefit from collaboration with groups similarly focused on a single community and its needs.

In contrast with traditional approaches to public contracting, which focus on the binary relationship between government overseers and their suppliers (e.g. Van Slyke and Hammonds 2003; Kelman 2002; Behn and Kant 1999), this research highlights the importance of broader networks in determining the success of performance accountability or contracting regimes (Brown and Potoski 2005).

Partnerships do not come without risk, either to government officials or to private organizations themselves. For districts seeking to build the quality and quantity of schools in a clear and flexible manner, however, collaborative management is a key tool for the development and improvement of schools.

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