Is Détente Possible?

District-charter school relations in four cities

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Public Impact

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FOREWORD

By Amber M. Northern and Michael J. Petrilli

Across the nation, charter schools continue to expand. Indeed, over the past five years, their enrollment has grown by 70 percent, so that approximately 2.7 million students now attend these schools of choice—more than 5 percent of the total number enrolled in public schools. Dozens of cities nationwide serve more than one in five of their public school students in charter schools.[1]

This is a hugely positive development for those of us who believe that all families should have the right to choose the best school for their children—provided, of course, that those schools have figured out the right recipe for delivering a high-quality education.

Whether you think the endgame of our current district-charter combination—at least in the cities—should be an all-charter system (as in New Orleans) or some sort of side-by-side system (as in Washington, D.C.), for the foreseeable future, most cities are likely to continue with a mixture of these two sectors. So we wanted to know: How can they peacefully coexist? And can they do better than that? Is it possible for them to actually collaborate in the service of students, families, and the public interest?

To address these questions, we teamed up with Public Impact, a stellar education policy research shop co-founded by Bryan and Emily Hassel. Bryan and his team have conducted scads of research on charter school policy, authorizing practices, and other supports to improve the charter sector. They've also spent time helping the leaders of urban districts strengthen their principal and teacher pipelines and equipping change agents to turn around schools. In addition to Bryan, we were fortunate to nab two of Public Impact's veteran and talented analysts, Daniela Doyle and Christen Holly.

This excellent research team ultimately chose five cities that had among the best conditions for district-charter collaboration: Boston, Cleveland, Denver, the District of Columbia, and Houston.

Boston, for instance, boasts some of the best charters in the country. All sixteen of its charter operators are members of a charter school alliance that communicates directly with Boston Public Schools.

Cleveland, also home to several high-performing charters, promotes buy-in among the sectors with a mindset of "We're in this together." The Cleveland Municipal School District includes in its accountability rating the performance of the charter schools it authorizes or with which it partners.

Denver, fortunate to be home to a string of pro-reform superintendents and school board members, has taken seriously its work as a Gates compact site since 2010[2] and enjoys the support of several local and national philanthropies that have supported the charter sector.

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[1] National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "A Growing Movement: America's Largest Charter School Communities," December 2014, http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2014_Enrollment_Share_FINAL.pdf.

[2] According to the Gates Foundation, District-Charter Collaboration Compacts are an initiative to highlight new ways that public charter schools and traditional public schools are working to provide a high-quality education for all students.

The District of Columbia hosts a quality-conscious charter authorizer and a mayor who sees district-charter collaboration as a vehicle to improve student outcomes.

Finally, Houston is the birthplace of two of the charter sector's rock stars (KIPP and Yes Prep). The market share of its charters has been growing within the boundaries of Houston Independent School District for some time.[3]

After scouring existing data and interviewing policy leaders and insiders in each city, the Public Impact team came away with a simple truth: District-charter engagement is unique to each city. The connections between the sectors are so distinctive, they ultimately settled on the metaphor of foreign relations to characterize each case. So, for instance, the District of Columbia is the "superpower summit" where two sectors of similar size and influence are compelled to work together while jealously guarding their own interests. Houston is a lesson in "isolationism" where each sector mostly pursues its own course (so much so that we omitted it from full discussion in the pages that follow). Any guess which city's district-charter relations were analogized to "protectionism under pressure"? Read the report to find out.

In the end, we found that the sectors now communicate with one another better than in the past, and some even share instructional strategies. Still, collaboration in all five sites is limited and often fragile.

That's somewhat disappointing, but not altogether surprising (institutions, after all, nearly always pursue their own interests). Nor does it mean that efforts to boost communication, share best practices, and lower the cost of providing services aren't worth trying. Think of it again in terms of foreign policy: Even superficial interactions (like student exchange programs) can ease tensions and keep the pot from boiling over. Peaceful coexistence is certainly better than the alternative.

But nobody should expect either sector to willingly cede much territory to the other anytime soon.

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We are indebted to all of the district staff, charter operators and authorizers, education advocates, funders, and other education stakeholders from our study sites who shared their time and reflections with us. We thank them for their willingness to speak candidly about their experiences.

On the Fordham side, we extend thanks to Chester E. Finn, Jr. and David Griffith, who each provided insightful feedback and helpful edits on drafts. Ellen Alpaugh led dissemination, Alyssa Schwenk funder relations, and Kevin Mahnken report production. We also thank Shannon Last for copy editing and Bill Buttaggi at Bill B Creative for layout design.

[3] Specifically, charter market share has grown from 15.1 percent to 21 percent in 2013–14. (See National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Dashboard: Houston Independent School District, http://www.publiccharters.org/dashboard/students/page/overview/district/TX-66/year/2012.) That said, an enrollment boom for all schools in Houston means that HISD is serving as many students as ever, even though its share of the market is declining.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the past quarter-century, charter schools have grown from a ragtag insurgency into a serious force in American K–12 education, serving as the public education provider for nearly three million children across the country.[1] But this nationwide growth has spread unevenly across U.S. cities. In most places, urban districts have successfully contained the charter insurgents, keeping them marginal and maintaining district preeminence—if not hegemony.[2]

In a small but growing number of cities, however, the charter sector has thrived and become a more serious contender for market share and educational power, too large for the prevailing power to ignore. "Engagement" of some kind has become necessary. But what form does that engagement take?

To find out, this report examines district-charter engagement in five cities—Boston, Cleveland, Denver, Houston, and Washington, D.C.—in pursuit of three questions: How are districts engaging charters? Why do districts choose to engage charters? And is engagement resulting in improvement? The report includes a cross-city analysis as well as case studies of each city except Houston (more on that later).[3]

These cases remain exceptions, not the norm. Yet they offer reasonably clear windows into the challenges faced by two sides of a shifting balance of power at a critical point in the evolution of American education. Districts and charters come to the table with cautious optimism and deeply rooted skepticism. And justifiably so. Engagement presents potential benefits—for charters, districts, and the public. At the same time, it poses risks for all parties. In particular, a thriving charter sector threatens traditional districts by competing with them for students and funding, while teaming up with a district may threaten a charter sector's valuable autonomy.

As we examined these evolving relationships in five major American cities, we found markedly different forms of engagement reminiscent of how international relations often play out. From Washington, D.C.'s "superpower summit" through Boston's "protectionism under pressure," the shifting district-charter interplay highlighted in this report may begin to point the way to a new world order in public education (see Table ES-1).

Table ES-1. District-charter engagement as international relations?

Boston	**Protectionism Under Pressure** The charter cap functions like a protective tariff, shielding the district from greater competition from charter upstarts. In the short term, protectionism creates space for limited engagement on logistical issues. It also allows district-devised school choices to proliferate. But in the long term, it reduces the pressure to engage in more transformative ways with the city's charter schools.
Cleveland	**Cultural and Economic Exchange** The two sectors share some instructional practices. The district gets to count partner charters in its accountability score, and the charters get a share of local levy dollars. There's mutual benefit in the arrangement, but not a great deal of engagement at the present time.

continued...

Table ES-1. District-charter engagement as international relations? (continued)

Denver	**Trading Partners** The two sectors engage on a relatively even playing field and trade openly to their mutual benefit. Like any trade partners, they have conflicts, but they currently enjoy a strong overall relationship.
District of Columbia	**Superpower Summit** Two "superpowers" of similar size and influence are compelled to work together. Neither side has any intention of allowing the other to threaten its interests, but the trend is toward productive coexistence.
Houston	**Isolationism** The district and charters largely pursue their own courses with limited contact. Each side thinks it is better off going its own way.

What does district-charter engagement look like?

Despite differing dynamics, the sites have some commonalities. We identified eight engagement activities that districts may and sometimes do pursue, organized around five goals.

Table ES-2. Goals and engagement activities

Goal	Activity
Improve communication	1. The district and charters establish official channels for communicating (e.g., working groups, steering committees, appointed representatives for different stakeholder groups).
Improve practice	2. The district and charters establish structured opportunities for school staff to share best practices and seek solutions to shared challenges (e.g., common professional development, working committees to discuss how best to implement Common Core or address the needs of English language learners).
Improve operational efficiency	3. The district and charters work together to lower the cost of providing key services (e.g., transportation, purchasing, special education, and facilities utilization and maintenance).
Provide more equitable access to existing schools	4. The district and charters report the same data metrics such that comparable, transparent, and timely information relative to student demographics and school performance is available publicly.
	5. The district and charters participate in a common and coordinated enrollment system.
	6. The district and charters coordinate to ensure that all students have access to high-quality school options regardless of their location or educational needs (e.g., strategically siting new schools, providing students with free and convenient transportation to any public school).
Increase supply of high-quality schools across the city	7. The district shares resources with charters, including local levy dollars and/or facilities, to make it easier for them to operate.
	8. The district actively works to grow the supply of high-quality charter schools in the city (e.g., recruiting new high-performing schools, advocating for the state to lift charter caps, asking city and local officials to take specific actions).

Across the five locations that we examined, most of these engagement activities remain nascent or only partially implemented. District-charter engagement remains new, spotty, and uncertain, as does its relationship to student learning.

Why do districts engage charters?

In this report, we focus on the district perspective. While charters can do relatively little to rouse an unresponsive district, a motivated district can offer incentives such as facilities and local property taxes. A number of factors influence how and why districts engage charters, and these often play out differently from what one might predict. Nevertheless, we identify five overarching takeaways.

Takeaway 1: Districts need a push. Districts and charters generally maintain their distance until and unless they find it in their interest to reach out and interact, and this often occurs only when some new event or development pushes them to do so.

> **Boston:** The opportunity to secure philanthropic funding and positive publicity got things started.
>
> **Cleveland:** The threat of a state takeover pushed the mayor to undertake bold reforms that included incentives for high-performing charters to align with the district.
>
> **Denver:** A sense of impending crisis driven by the decline in district enrollment enabled district leaders to adopt a portfolio approach that supports and grows high-quality charters.
>
> **Washington, D.C.:** Charter market share reached a "tipping point," prompting the district to engage charters to help families navigate the two-sector public education system.

Takeaway 2: Bold leadership is required. Ultimately, district leaders—including the superintendent, school board, and, in some places, the mayor—must demonstrate strong leadership if engagement is to occur. Cleveland's mayor and (to a lesser extent) Boston's former mayor demonstrated such leadership, as did Denver's last two superintendents and the elected boards supporting them.

Takeaway 3: Outside influencers prime the pump. A range of stakeholders, including foundations, advocacy organizations, politicians, unions, parents, and the business community, can support or discourage engagement. Across the study sites, these outside influencers used their money and power to shape district-charter engagement by elevating issues, providing political cover, and brokering deals behind the scenes.

Takeaway 4: Districts need skin in the game. Districts have a stake in charter success when they authorize charters—or when a district's "report card" includes the charters it either authorizes (Denver) or partners with (Cleveland). In these cases, the districts had strong reasons to engage, and they have. In the short term, conditions that limit the charter threat can also open up space for engagement. Examples include charter caps and policies that protect districts from the financial impact of losing students to charters (Boston). But if these conditions are permanent or persistent, they will limit the impact charters could otherwise achieve through serving a growing number of students.

Takeaway 5: Competition doesn't necessarily compel engagement. A growing charter sector exerts financial, logistical, and academic pressures on the district. The *existence* of these pressures is fairly predictable, but their impact on district-charter engagement is not.

Is there evidence that engagement is resulting in improvements?

Isolating the effect of district-charter engagement on student performance is nearly impossible. Still, there are clues that engagement may be having a positive impact:

1. **Districts and charter leaders independently report having better relationships.** In Boston, Denver, and Washington, D.C., interviewees from both sectors told us that communication between them has improved as a result of engagement efforts.
2. **Cities and districts are hiring former charter leaders for key education positions.** Every site we studied has hired or elected at least one individual with a charter background. The positions that they occupy include mayor, superintendent, school committee member, chief academic officer, executive director of charter schools, and deputy mayor for education.
3. **A few examples of lower operational costs and improved service have emerged.** These changes occurred as a result of innovations in transportation (Boston and Denver) and the introduction of common enrollment systems (Denver and Washington, D.C.).
4. **High-performing charters are replacing low-performing district schools in Denver**, supporting steady but modest student performance gains across the city and offering more students a seat in "high-quality"[4] schools.

Despite these positive signs and ongoing efforts by the Gates Foundation and the Center on Reinventing Public Education to promote district-charter engagement, relations in general remain thin, and the direct benefits difficult to quantify.

Recommendations

We offer seven recommendations for district leaders, charter leaders, and outside stakeholders to encourage more productive engagement between the two sectors:

For district leaders

1. **Choose your charter partners wisely.** Focus your time, energy, and resources on the highest-performing charters and those with the greatest capacity to do right by kids.
2. **Open the facilities door.** Provide access to district-owned facilities, share local funding, and actively advocate for high-quality schools of all types to ease excellent charters' struggles and encourage charters to participate in other forms of engagement.

For charter leaders

3. **Be pragmatic. Be creative. Cut a deal.** There may be room for compromise on practices once considered essential to charter autonomy—for example, allowing for some neighborhood preference in charter school admissions to help districts provide access to high-quality schools for students in underserved areas.
4. **Make yourself valuable.** Charters can make themselves indispensable to the district by backing bond issues, fighting for more state education funding, serving specific student groups, garnering publicity that can help both sectors, or, if possible under state law, partnering in ways that allow the district to count the operator's schools in its accountability system.

For outside influencers

5. **Push for policy solutions.** Advocate for policies that support charter growth and provide political cover for education leaders when they take the risk to engage.
6. **Rally the troops.** Harness the power of the purse, support reform-minded leaders, and raise awareness around key issues in order to foster engagement that pays off for schools, students, and the public.

For all

7. **Protect existing engagement efforts from future political change.** Institutionalize new forms of engagement through structures outside of the district, including binding multi-year contracts or new legislation.

INTRODUCTION

In the past quarter-century, charter schools have grown from a ragtag insurgency to a serious force in American education. They now provide public education for nearly three million children across most of the country.[5] But this nationwide growth has been uneven. In most places, urban school districts have successfully contained the charter insurgents, keeping them marginal and maintaining district preeminence—if not hegemony.[6] From the start, many districts sided with teachers' unions and other charter foes to block enabling state legislation or (when this failed) insisted that charters be limited in number and subject to heavy regulation. In many places today, these hostilities continue unabated. In a small but growing number of cities, however, the charter sector has thrived, increased its market share, and become a more serious contender for influence and resources, too large for the prevailing power to ignore. Thanks to twenty-five years of nearly unbroken growth, charters now enroll at least one-fourth of public school students in more than twenty cities, and in New Orleans and Detroit, they enroll more students than the traditional districts.[7] Nevertheless, demand for charters continues to exceed supply in many markets, as demonstrated by the number and length of student waitlists.[8] And in most cities, charters appear to be outperforming their district competition (though the quality of individual schools varies).[9]

It's clear that charters will figure prominently in the education ecosystems of dozens of cities and the lives of many children, most of them exceptionally needy. Like nations facing the rise of other powers on the global playing field, districts in such cities have sometimes responded to the growing salience—and potential—of their charter sectors by "engaging" them, i.e., by collaborating or coordinating in pursuit of a common goal or to address practical challenges. These cases remain exceptions, not the norm. Yet they offer windows into challenges faced by the two sectors in this new world order. This report examines why engagement is happening, how it's working, and what it demands from both sides if it's to succeed.

Potential benefits of engagement

While not every form of district-charter engagement is productive, some have the potential to serve the interests of both sectors as well as the city's families and children. For example, engagement offers districts the opportunity to achieve greater operational efficiency and share the burden of providing equitable access to all students. And it offers charters the possibility of faster growth and greater access to district resources, especially facilities (see *Goals of engagement* and *What's in it for charters?,* pages 14 and 15 respectively).

Engagement also has the potential to serve the public interest in a number of ways. For example, by adopting a common enrollment or data reporting system, districts and charters can make the process of choosing and enrolling in a good school more manageable for families. Similarly, by coordinating on issues such as transportation and facilities, the two sectors may better utilize public resources and save taxpayers money. By jointly identifying needs and determining where to open new schools, they may also be better suited to provide all students with equitable access to high-quality schools. Finally, by joining forces, districts and charters might increase the number of such schools in a city at a faster pace than they would working independently.

Risks of engagement

Despite these potential benefits, however, district-charter engagement also carries risks for both sectors. For example, many districts may be hesitant to engage with charters, given the threat they pose to district enrollment and associated funding. Similarly, charter leaders have reason for caution, since "engagement" can easily become a guise for imposing burdensome rules and regulations that undermine the very autonomies that make charters different (and contribute to their appeal and success).

Though preserving a district's power should not be a public priority, engagement is not necessarily a good thing. To the extent that engagement hamstrings charters, or otherwise interferes with their success, it may not be in the public interest. Coordinating or collaborating with another entity (let alone dozens of entities) is cumbersome under the best of circumstances, and it may be especially difficult for districts and charters given their history of antagonism.

About this report

To better understand district-charter engagement and its implications, we examine the relationship between the sectors in five cities, with the goal of answering three questions:

1. How are districts engaging charters?
2. Why do districts choose to engage charters?
3. Is there evidence—or are there clues—that engagement is resulting in improvements?

These cities offer valuable lessons for district leaders, charter leaders, and other stakeholders seeking to promote productive engagement in their communities.

Engagement from the district perspective

District-charter engagement is obviously a two-way street. In this report, we focus on the district perspective because in many ways, districts "hold the cards." While charters can do relatively little to rouse an unresponsive district, a motivated district has a number of carrots it can dangle to encourage charters to engage (such as access to facilities and local property taxes). Moreover, because most cities have multiple charter operators, districts can focus on those that interest them.[10] Engagement, in other words, does not necessarily involve a city's entire charter sector.

This report does not ignore the charter perspective, however. In a series of sidebars called "The charter side of the equation," we consider the same questions from the charter point of view.

What this report adds

Most research on district-charter relationships has focused on two ways that a district might respond to charters: stepping up its game to compete with them and learning from their best practices (see *What does previous research tell us about district-charter relationships?*).

In contrast, this report focuses on *why* districts engage charters by considering a broad range of factors that might encourage or discourage such engagement, including district and charter leadership, third-party stakeholders, the size and structure of the charter market, and the broader fiscal and policy landscape. We also make a point of considering both the potential benefits and the risks of district-charter engagement.

How this report is organized

The rest of this report is organized into six sections:

- **Methods:** Our site selection process, data sources, and analytical approach
- **Forms of engagement:** The goals of engagement and the kinds of activities related to them
- **Getting to green:** The factors that make engagement more or less likely
- **Discussion:** Signs that engagement efforts have been productive, lingering risks, persistent barriers, and the path ahead

- **Recommendations:** Steps that district leaders, charter leaders, and other stakeholders can take to support effective engagement
- **Case studies:** Profiles of engagement efforts in four cities.

What does previous research tell us about district-charter relationships?

The effect of charter competition on district performance

Most research about district-charter relationships has focused on whether the presence of charters leads to improvement in district performance. Yet the answer to that important question remains murky. The growth of a city's charter sector may coincide with any number of other reforms, making it difficult to assign causality to charter market share alone. Moreover, the results to date have been mixed, with some studies concluding that charter competition contributes to modest performance gains by district pupils (especially low-income students)[11] and others finding no impact, or even a small negative impact, on district performance.[12]

How districts respond to charters

A body of qualitative research describes the specific operational and instructional changes that districts have implemented in response to charters, including savvier marketing, improvements in customer service, and efforts to provide district schools with more charter-like autonomies. These studies have found that districts are increasingly responding to charters by taking steps to improve their own schools—rather than putting their energy into fighting charters, as many did in the past.[13]

The benefits and challenges of collaboration

A handful of analysts have examined the district-charter relationship and potential benefits of collaboration. Most notably, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is engaged in an ongoing analysis of twenty-one cities in which education leaders have signed official District-Charter Collaboration Compacts, as part of an initiative by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to broker healthy relationships between the sectors (see page 22 for more on that initiative). To date, however, this work has identified few instances in which districts and charters have realized more than a handful of the goals in their compacts, and it has been challenging in some cities for the sectors to maintain the momentum required for successful collaboration efforts.[14]

Related studies have evaluated the impact of particular programs on which the district and charters have collaborated, such as unified enrollment systems and shared pupil transportation.[15] Many of these studies have found that these programs generate modest benefits, including greater transparency around admissions, better information about schools, a more manageable enrollment process, gains in student attendance, and cost savings. However, the programs have not been linked to improvements in student achievement, and the studies highlight a number of implementation challenges, such as a shortage of high-quality schools.

METHODS

When selecting sites for our case studies, we looked for cities that varied in size, location, politics, governing arrangements, and charter landscape (e.g., market share, number and type of authorizers, types of charter operators). We also searched for sites where a noteworthy activity or initiative was occurring between the district and charters.[16] For example, we considered cities that had signed district-charter compacts as part of the aforementioned Gates initiative. We also looked at districts in CRPE's Portfolio Network, which have committed to growing the number of high-quality options by closing low-performing schools and opening high-performing ones (purportedly without regard to sector).

In the end, we targeted four cities: Boston, Cleveland, Denver, and Washington, D.C.[17] A fifth site (Houston) was excluded after initial research found little consequential district-charter engagement occurring there (see *Isolationism in Houston: a tale of two sectors*, page 29).

To learn about charter engagement in each city, we combed through news stories, independent reports, and district documents. We also conducted a minimum of seven interviews for each city, which included district and charter leaders, representatives from the nonprofit and advocacy arenas, education reporters, and various education experts. Finally, we examined student performance and enrollment data. Table 1 presents an overview of the four sites for the 2014–15 school year.

Table 1. Site overview (2014–15)

	Boston	Cleveland	Denver	Washington, D.C.
Charter market share[18]	18%	32%	17%	44%
Number of charter schools	26[19]	55	46	112
Charter enrollment	10,155	18,557	15,024	37,684
District enrollment	56,757	39,083	73,862	47,548
Number of authorizers	1	10	1	1
District is an authorizer	No	Yes (8)*	Yes (46)*	No
District governance	Mayoral control	Mayoral control	Elected board	Mayoral control

** Number of charter schools authorized by the district shown in ( ).*

FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT

District-charter engagement has the potential to advance the public interest in a number of ways. But it also offers districts the opportunity to achieve some of their own goals, which in turn serve as the impetus for most engagement efforts. In this section, we describe five goals that districts seek to meet by engaging with charters, as well as eight activities they have undertaken to achieve those goals.[20] We then summarize the engagement activities that are occurring in each of our four sites.

Goals of engagement

What might districts hope to achieve through engagement?

Goal 1: Improve communication (IC). Often, there are no built-in channels through which district and charter leaders can communicate unless the district authorizes the charter school—and even then, communication is often limited to a small number of topics and participants (see *Where does authorizing fit?*). Yet strong lines of communication are necessary to accomplish many (if not all) of the other goals on this list.

Goal 2: Improve practice (IP). One potential benefit of charters is that they can serve as innovation labs from which the district can derive new and potentially more effective practices. Additionally, charters can be partners in problem solving around shared challenges, such as how best to implement new academic standards or meet the instructional needs of English language learners (ELLs).

Goal 3: Improve operational efficiencies (OE). Districts often have opportunities to save money and improve the quality of services if they pool resources or coordinate with charters on issues like facilities utilization, transportation, and special education services. We see this more often in districts where shrinking enrollment forces operational adjustments, but even in growing districts, some efficiency gains are often possible.

Goal 4: Provide more equitable access (EA). The district is the system of default, meaning it must provide a seat for every student who needs one, regardless of where that student lives, her educational need, or date of enrollment.[22] But shrinking district enrollment can make it harder for the district to efficiently serve students in all neighborhoods. And the proliferation of school options can make it more difficult for families to navigate the system. To address these challenges, districts can engage charters to coordinate enrollment and data reporting policies and site new schools in ways that don't leave districts with all of the hardest-to-serve students.

Where does authorizing fit?

Hundreds of U.S. school districts authorize charter schools and thus have some degree of relations with them. However, these relationships are often limited to oversight (by the district) and compliance (by the charter).[21] Although authorizing districts may build on established lines of communication when engaging charters, the oversight/compliance dynamic differs from the type of engagement we examine in this report, which is characterized by collaboration and/or coordination in pursuit of a common goal or to address shared challenges. Consequently, we do not include district authorizing in our list of engagement activities, although it's an important factor in Denver and Cleveland.

Goal 5: Increase the supply of high-quality schools (QS). A number of districts have sought to improve school quality by adopting a "portfolio strategy" that hinges on closing or turning around low-performing schools and opening new, high-performing schools, regardless of the school operator (see *What it means to adopt a "portfolio strategy"*). Growing the supply of high-performing charter schools is an important piece of a broader portfolio strategy.

Although these goals are district-centric, charters usually share most of them, in addition to having their own goals for engagement (see *What's in it for charters?*).

What it means to adopt a "portfolio strategy"

Traditionally, districts have taken a one-size-fits-all approach to running schools by insisting that the central office establish district-wide policies on staffing, instruction, spending, and scheduling. However, in accordance with principles set forth by the Center on Reinventing Public Education, districts that adopt a "portfolio strategy" are agnostic about who operates schools (the district or charters).[23] Instead, these districts focus on creating a diverse "portfolio" of high-performing schools by closing low-performers and opening new, high-quality options in their place. They also promote school autonomy by giving principals greater authority over operational decisions traditionally made by the district's central office.

CRPE has identified components of a portfolio strategy, including: good options and choices for all families; school autonomy; pupil-based funding for all schools; a talent recruitment strategy; and performance-based accountability for schools. However, as CRPE's most recent evaluation of the Portfolio Network shows, most districts struggle to truly "walk the walk" by implementing these components, which has limited the approach's success in many places.[24] Three of our cities (Boston, Cleveland, and Denver) are members of CRPE's Portfolio Network—meaning they have committed to a portfolio strategy, at least in theory.

THE CHARTER SIDE OF THE EQUATION

What's in it for charters?

Charters usually share most of the engagement goals outlined earlier. But they may also have their own goals, including:

- **Gaining access to resources.** Currently, charters in most cities have limited access to a number of resources that district schools take for granted, including free or low-cost facilities, transportation, and local tax dollars.[25]
- **Getting the opportunity to grow.** The charter sector is generally looking for ways to grow, but that's particularly challenging in states or districts where there is a cap. If the district is also the authorizer, charters might see engagement as a way to enhance their potential for growth, possibly by securing facilities to enroll more students.
- **Silencing naysayers.** Charters are often accused of "creaming" the best students, leaving the district to deal with the neediest children. Consequently, in some cities, charters have been motivated to work with the district to share and publish comparable demographic data to set the record straight or otherwise bolster their reputation.

Engagement activities

Table 2 describes eight activities districts might engage in to achieve the goals described above, as well as examples of such activities in our sites. This list is obviously not comprehensive.

Table 2. Engagement activities

Goal	Activity	Example
IC	1. The district and charters establish official channels for communicating (e.g., working groups, steering committees, appointed representatives for different stakeholder groups).	In 2013, **Denver** Public Schools and the city's charter operators formed the District Charter Collaborative Council as a permanent body. The council meets monthly and consists of a mix of appointed and elected representatives from both sectors. It also includes five working groups designed to tackle the challenges associated with the strategic priorities that it identifies.[26]
IP	2. The district and charters establish structured opportunities for school-level employees to share best practices and problem-solve around shared challenges (e.g., common professional development, working committees to discuss how best to implement Common Core or address ELL student needs).	Educators from the **Cleveland** Metropolitan School District and fourteen of that city's charter schools share best practices through the Cleveland Quality Schools Network.
OE	3. The district and charters work together to lower the cost of providing key services (e.g., transportation, purchasing, special education, and facilities utilization and maintenance).	In **Boston**, the district and charters worked together to shift the start and end times of some charter schools, reducing the district's transportation costs by nearly $2 million annually.
EA	4. The district and charters report the same data metrics such that comparable, transparent and timely information relative to student demographics and school performance is available publicly.	Since 2013, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and charter schools in **Washington, D.C.** have worked with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) to publish annual "equity reports" that present the same data for all public schools in the city. The reports include demographic and performance data, attendance and absence rates, suspension and expulsion rates, and student entry and withdrawal rates.
EA	5. The district and charters participate in a common and coordinated enrollment system.	DCPS and most **Washington, D.C.** charter operators work with OSSE to run a unified enrollment system (My School DC) through which students can enroll at any participating school through a single process.
EA	6. The district and charters coordinate to ensure that all students have access to high-quality school options regardless of their location or educational needs (e.g., strategically siting new schools, providing students free and convenient transportation to any public school).	Each year, **Denver** Public Schools conducts a "call for quality schools" and invites school operators to apply to open new high-performing schools where they are most needed.

continued...

Table 2. Engagement activities (continued)

Goal	Activity	Example
QS	7. The district shares resources with charters, including local levy dollars and/or facilities, to make it easier for them to operate.	**Cleveland** Metropolitan School District shares a portion of property levy dollars with fourteen partner charters.
QS	8. The district actively works to grow the supply of high-quality charter schools in the city (e.g., recruiting new high-performing schools, advocating for the state to lift charter caps, asking city and local officials to take specific actions).	**Denver** Public Schools recruits new charter schools.[27] It has also created a differentiated application for high-performing charter operators seeking to replicate.

Key

IC – Improve communication
IP – Improve practice
OE – Improve operational efficiencies
EA – Improve equitable access of existing schools for families
QS – Increase supply of high-quality schools across the city

That a district would willingly engage in the final two activities (7 and 8) may seem fanciful, since doing so would require a commitment to the public interest (or student interests) that is contrary to the district's self-interest. Nevertheless, we include them on our list because they are occurring in some places. Our case studies identify a few modest examples where the district *is* sharing resources and/or taking steps to grow the supply of high-quality charter schools in the city. They also make it easier for us to measure the reality of engagement against its potential.

District-charter engagement in our study sites

Let's look now at how the two sectors are interacting across our five cities in relation to these activities (see Table 3). Like nations on the international stage, they are forging markedly different types of relationships based on their independent and mutual interests.

Table 3. International relations between the district and charter sectors?

Boston	**Protectionism Under Pressure** The charter cap functions like a protective tariff, shielding the district from greater competition from charter upstarts. In the short term, protectionism creates space for limited engagement on logistical issues. It also allows district-devised school choices to proliferate. But in the long term, it reduces the pressure to engage in more transformative ways with the city's charter schools.
Cleveland	**Cultural and Economic Exchange** The two sectors share some instructional practices. The district gets to count charters in its accountability score, and the charters get a share of local levy dollars. There's mutual benefit in the arrangement, but not a great deal of engagement at the present time.
Denver	**Trading Partners** The two sectors engage on a relatively even playing field and trade openly to their mutual benefit. Like any trade partners, they have conflicts, but they currently enjoy a strong overall relationship.
District of Columbia	**Superpower Summit** Two "superpowers" of similar size and influence are compelled to work together. Neither side has any intention of allowing the other to threaten its interests, but the trend is toward productive co existence.
Houston	**Isolationism** The district and charters largely pursue their own courses with limited contact. Each side thinks it is better off going its own way.

Table 4 shows that even in these sites, which we selected in part because they showed evidence of district-charter engagement, not much of significance has actually occurred—at least not across the eight possible activities we identified. Specifically, although the district and charters have established official communication channels in all sites except Houston, and common enrollment systems and shared reporting practices in two (Denver and Washington, D.C.), the other engagement activities have been only partially implemented across sites. (See case study profiles for more.)

But why?

That's the topic of the next section.

Table 4. Overview of engagement activities in each city[28]

Goal	Activity	Boston	Cleveland	Denver	District of Columbia
IC	1. The district and charters establish official channels for communicating (e.g., working groups, steering committees, appointed representatives for different stakeholder groups).				
IP	2. The district and charters establish structured opportunities for school-level employees to share best practices and problem-solve around shared challenges (e.g., common professional development, working committees to discuss how best to implement Common Core or address ELL student needs).				
OE	3. The district and charters work together to lower the cost of providing key services (e.g., transportation, purchasing, special education, and facilities utilization and maintenance).				
EA	4. The district and charters report the same data metrics such that comparable, transparent and timely information relative to student demographics and school performance is available publicly.				
EA	5. The district and charters participate in a common and coordinated enrollment system.				
EA	6. The district and charters coordinate to ensure that all students have access to high-quality school options regardless of their location or educational needs (e.g., strategically siting new schools, providing students free and convenient transportation to any public school).				
QS	7. The district shares resources with charters, including local levy dollars and/or facilities, to make it easier for them to operate.				
QS	8. The district actively works to grow the supply of high-quality charter schools in the city (e.g., recruiting new high-performing schools, advocating for the state to lift charter caps, asking city and local officials to take specific actions).				

Potential goals of engagement

IC – Improve communication
IP – Improve practice
OE – Improve operational efficiencies
EA – Improve equitable access of existing schools for families
QS – Increase supply of high-quality schools across the city

Extent of engagement

Fully implemented *(definitive evidence of widespread implementation)*

Partially implemented *(evidence of progress beyond a statement of intent)*

Not implemented *(no concrete evidence of activity)*

GETTING TO GREEN

It should come as no surprise that districts engage charters in ways that enable them to get more out of the process than they put in, since any decently run organization will seek to reap the greatest benefit from the least effort and expense. Still, recognizing that districts (and charters) are fundamentally self-interested represents a departure from the traditional discourse around district-charter collaboration, which often seems based on little more than wishful thinking and noble intentions.

Indeed, district calculations about the potential benefits and costs of charter engagement are complex. As much as a district may stand to gain from operational efficiencies, for example, collaborating with charters to attain those gains may create counter-balancing costs. These include the time and attention needed to forge and maintain collaboration, as well as the political costs—such as undermining district efforts to wring more resources out of state coffers by signaling that they don't need them as much. For reasons like these, districts may determine that the juice of engagement is not worth the squeeze. Apparently, as this section attests, they make that determination quite often.

Takeaways

A variety of factors affect how a district calculates the costs and benefits of engagement. These combine in different (and sometimes surprising) ways, depending on the city. Still, five takeaways help to explain why some districts engage.

Takeaway 1: Districts need a push.

Districts and charters will usually maintain their distance unless they find it in their interest to reach out and interact, and this often occurs only when some new event or development pushes them to do so (although in most cases it would be an exaggeration to say the district was *forced* to engage).

In Cleveland, the district was threatened with state takeover in 2011, prompting its mayor to propose an ambitious plan to transform the city's schools, in part by growing and partnering with high-performing charters. In this case, the district had a strong incentive to reach out to charters, since getting the Cleveland Plan approved and funded required the political support of families whose children were enrolled in them.

In Washington, D.C., the education system reached a kind of tipping point as charter enrollment approached 50 percent, making it difficult for the district to carry out its mission without assistance from charters. Consequently, in addition to implementing a variety of reforms aimed at improving the quality and competitiveness of the schools it operates, DCPS has worked with charter leaders to address logistical challenges related to student enrollment.

In Denver, engagement efforts can be traced to a 2007 article in the *Rocky Mountain News*, which revealed that a quarter of students residing within Denver Public Schools (DPS) boundaries attended non-district schools. The article created a stir in the Denver community, providing an opening for a reform-minded superintendent to initiate a portfolio-based strategy that included charter schools (see *What it means to adopt a "portfolio strategy,"* page 15).

Finally, in Boston, engagement was the result of positive incentives. In 2010, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation offered the city the opportunity to become a "Compact site" (see *The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation compact initiative*). As part of their compact, Boston Public Schools and neighboring charters developed and signed an agreement outlining how they would collaborate with one another,[29] in return for which the Gates Foundation awarded Boston a $100,000 planning grant and, subsequently, $3.35 million more in compact-related funding.

Enrollment trends

In all our study sites, charter enrollment has grown rapidly in the last five years, while district enrollment has grown more slowly or declined (see Table 5).

In Denver, enrollment has been increasing in both sectors over the last five years. Similarly, in Washington, D.C., charter enrollment has grown steadily, while district enrollment has recently rebounded after years of decline.

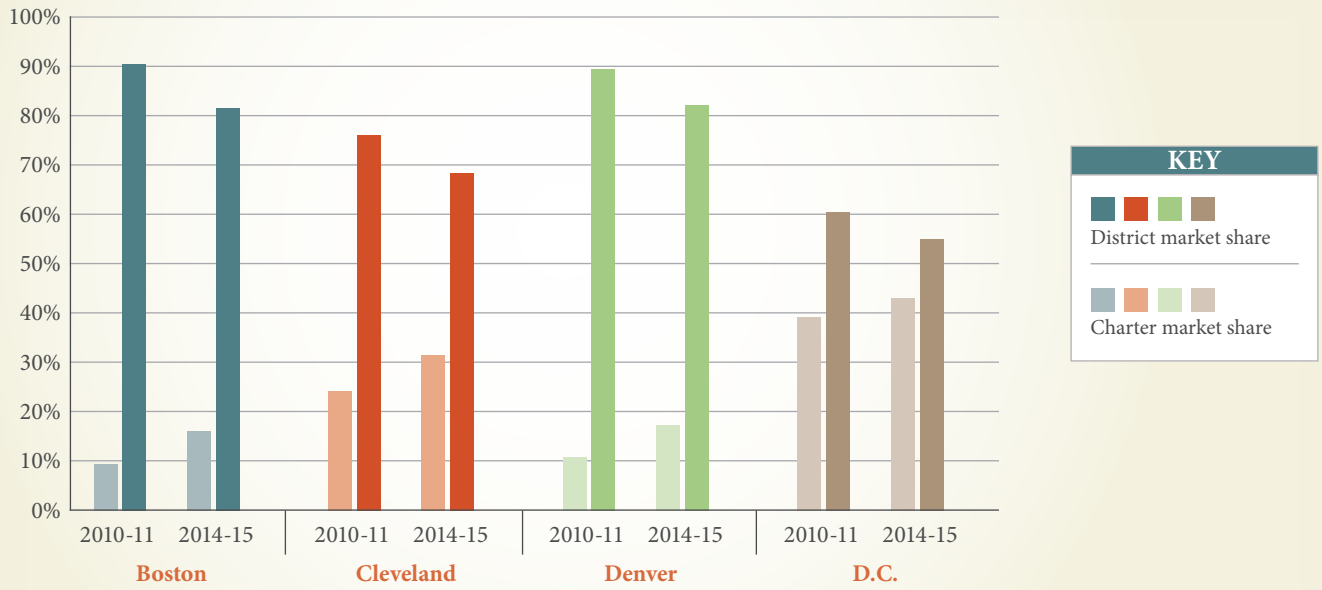
In contrast, pupil numbers have fallen by nearly six thousand in CMSD (13 percent), while charter enrollment has grown by 4,362. And in Boston, district enrollment has remained flat, while charter enrollment has nearly doubled.

Table 5. Five-year enrollment trends[30]

	2010–11	11–12	12–13	13–14	14–15	5-Yr Change	
						Students	% Change
Boston Charters[31]	5,519	5,930	7,146	8,464	10,155	+4,636	+84%
BPS	56,578	56,410	56,656	56,522	56,757	+179	+0%
Cleveland Charters	14,195	15,580	17,239	18,318	18,557	+4,362	+31%
CMSD	45,060	42,883	40,072	38,775	39,083	-5,977	-13%
Denver Charters	8,341	9,723	11,793	13786	15,024	+6,683	+80%
DPS	69,847	71,013	71,449	72,304	73,862	+4,015	+6%
D.C. Charters	29,356	31,562	34,673	36,565	37,684	+8,328	+44%
DCPS	45,630	45,191	45,557	46,393	47,548	+1,918	+5%

Charter market share has increased in all four of our sites. In 2014–15, charters enrolled between 17 percent and 44 percent of public school students in the four cities, and charter market share has grown between five and eight percentage points since 2010–11 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Change in market share, 2010–11 v. 2014–5



The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation compact initiative

In 2010, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation brought together a group of district and charter leaders who had begun exploring ways to work with (rather than against) one another. Shortly thereafter, it announced a new District-Charter Collaboration Compact initiative. The foundation hoped to incentivize deeper collaboration among districts and charters in cities where the political climate supported it and where the sectors had already shown an interest in collaborating.

Since announcing the initiative, the foundation has supported such collaboration in twenty-one cities, including Boston, Cleveland, and Denver. Participating cities receive $100,000 planning grants to develop a compact between the sectors outlining how they will work together to better serve students.

The foundation has also awarded $25 million to seven cities (including Boston and Denver) to implement and scale the commitments outlined in their compacts.

Although compacts have few required elements, the foundation has encouraged participants to include steps to improve the distribution of resources (such as funding and facilities) and ensure that students have equitable access to great schools. Compacts also commonly include plans to streamline student enrollment, adopt common performance measures, and share tools and best practices for instruction and professional development.

Takeaway 2: Bold leadership is required.

In order for engagement to occur, district leaders—including the superintendent, an elected school board, and (in three of our four cases) the mayor—must decide that the potential benefits are worth the risks and be willing to seize the opportunity, even if this means facing down political opponents.

Mayoral leadership bolsters engagement in Boston and Cleveland

In Boston and Cleveland, the mayor controls the district, and has thus been very important to engagement efforts.[32]

According to interviewees, former Boston Mayor Thomas Menino essentially demanded that the district and charters work together to better support students at a 2010 convening of the sectors—during which he remarked that all of the kids in the city were "his" kids. Although Menino had no authority over the city's Commonwealth charters, several charter operators took his request to heart, and the two sectors were primed to work together when the city became a Gates compact site in 2011. As one interviewee remarked, "This [Gates compact work] goes nowhere without the mayor."

Similarly, Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson played a key role in encouraging greater district-charter engagement in his city. Although charter schools were just a small piece of the Cleveland Plan, by offering them incentives to align with the district (including the opportunity to share in one mill of the city's new tax levy), the mayor secured the support of the governor, state legislators, and influential local charter supporters.[33]

Finally, in Washington, D.C., Mayors Adrian Fenty and then Vincent Gray largely left it to their appointed chancellor (the district superintendent) to determine whether and how to engage charter schools. However, under Mayor Muriel Bowser (who took office in January 2015) the chancellor now reports to the deputy mayor for education (DME), whom the mayor has charged with ensuring greater cross-sector collaboration. The mayor has launched a new Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force, although it's too soon to tell if these efforts will bear fruit.

Denver's superintendents lead the way

Somewhat to our surprise, the clearest example of district leadership comes not from a mayoral-control city, but from Denver. There, reform-minded superintendents have engaged charters with increasing enthusiasm over the past decade, despite the political risks. When the *Rocky Mountain News* published an enrollment exposé in 2007, Superintendent Michael Bennet (now a U.S. senator) could have responded in any number of ways; but he chose to use the opportunity to push for a partnership with charters (among other reforms). His successor, Tom Boasberg, has continued this partnership, although staying the course has not always been easy. Within months of Boasberg's appointment, the Denver school board almost lost its pro-reform majority, an event widely interpreted as a sign of voter disapproval. Yet Boasberg soon regained board support[34] and has since taken one step after another to engage the city's charters.

When district leadership changes

Because district leadership is so critical to district-charter engagement efforts, changes to it can imperil formal agreements between the sectors—a point emphasized by charter interviewees in all our cities, who expressed concern about the sustainability of such plans and were hesitant to become too dependent on them.

Perhaps not coincidentally, there has been remarkable continuity in district leadership across our sites in recent years—which may partially explain why there is more engagement activity there, however limited.[35] Yet charter leaders need only look at New York City to see the fragility of district-charter engagement efforts. There, former mayor and charter supporter Michael Bloomberg has been replaced by Bill de Blasio, who has proposed cutting the charter school construction fund by $210 million and attempted to impose a moratorium on co-locating charters in district facilities.[36] Though charter leaders have so far managed to fend off this challenge, it is clear that the city's era of constructive engagement is over.

Of course, charter leadership also matters (see *What role does charter leadership play?*).

THE CHARTER SIDE OF THE EQUATION

What role does charter leadership play?

Our sites provide clear examples of both the lengths to which charter leaders are willing to go (when engaging the district will benefit their schools) *and* the barriers they erect to stop engagement (when it threatens their autonomy).

Breakthrough Schools encourage district engagement in Cleveland

When John Zitzner, the founder of Entrepreneurship Prep (E Prep) charter schools, was considering opening his first school in 2005, he asked CMSD to authorize it—something no other charter operator in the city had done.[37] By making E Prep part of the district, Zitzner hoped to shift the conversation about Cleveland's schools so it was focused on school quality, rather than disputes between sectors. Five years later, he joined forces with two other high-performing charter networks in the city (Citizens Academy and Intergenerational Schools) to create Breakthrough Charter Schools. Together, these networks have forged an even more visible alliance with the district. Six of the eight schools the district now authorizes are part of the Breakthrough network,[38] and all nine Breakthrough schools have formally "partnered" with the district.[39] In 2012, Breakthrough played a critical role in rallying support for the tax levy that funded the Cleveland Plan.

The Public Charter School Board expresses concerns in D.C.

By contrast, in 2014, charter and district leaders in Washington, D.C. reached a stalemate over school assignment plans. The root of the problem was a recommendation that charters set aside a certain number of seats for at-risk students. The DC Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB), which authorizes all charters in the District, has been very clear that it views any effort to direct where new charter schools open or which students enroll in them (two of the district's key concerns) as an encroachment on charter autonomy. A new collaboration task force is scheduled to take up this and other issues in 2015.

Takeaway 3: Outside influencers prime the pump.

A long list of third parties can push district leaders to engage with charters—or not. Across our sites, philanthropic organizations, advocacy organizations, and local and state politicians were the most significant actors in the engagement process (although businesses, unions, and parents also played a role).[40] These groups used their money and connections to elevate issues, provide political cover, and broker deals to further engagement. Where they failed to play these roles, engagement efforts typically showed less momentum.

Odd bedfellows save the Cleveland Plan

To develop the Cleveland Plan, Mayor Jackson consulted with business leaders and local foundation representatives who were deeply involved in both the city's charter movement and CMSD's own reform efforts. These individuals used their experience and connections to expose Jackson to the reform approaches that other cities (like Indianapolis) were implementing—and to shape the plan in ways that encouraged greater district-charter engagement.

Once the plan reached the state legislature, a motley crew of politicians proved key to its survival, as unions fought provisions to weaken bargaining agreements and charter advocates resisted giving the mayor more control over local operators.[41] The plan's prospects were greatly enhanced by public support from Republican Governor John Kasich, who appeared alongside Mayor Jackson (a Democrat) at a press conference and even asked members of his church to pray for those involved to "find the courage to support Mayor Frank Jackson."[42] In the end, legislators from both parties also backed the plan, despite facing criticism from various corners. As the *Plain Dealer* editorial board noted at the time, Jackson had "plenty of odd bedfellows."[43]

Nonprofits boost Denver's engagement efforts

Though a variety of stakeholders have shaped Denver's education landscape, nonprofits have played a particularly significant role in encouraging district-charter engagement. For example, the 2007 enrollment exposé (see Denver case study) was commissioned by the Piton Foundation (a local philanthropy). In the years since, a number of other funders and nonprofits—such as the Donnell-Kay Foundation, the Colorado League of Charter Schools, and A+ Denver—have supported DPS's efforts to engage charters by publishing reports, convening stakeholders, and partnering with the district and charters around new initiatives.[44] A number of national advocacy organizations and donors, including Education Reform Now (a sister organization to Democrats for Education Reform) and Michael Bloomberg, have also spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on Denver school board elections in an effort to keep the majority of seats in the hands of reformers. Denver is also a Gates compact site, and to date, the foundation has awarded DPS and local charters over $4 million to support that work.

Takeaway 4: Districts need skin in the game.

Giving districts a stake in charters' success gives them a long-term incentive to engage—something no amount of money provided up front can accomplish. Our sites suggest two ways that districts can be so incentivized:

1. The state includes charter performance data in the district's accountability score.

In both Denver and Cleveland, district-authorized charters are included in the district's accountability score; and as part of the Cleveland Plan, charters that formally partner with CMSD are also included in the district's accountability score. Including charters in this way gives the district an incentive to align with and assist the best schools. Yet this possibility appeals only where high-performing charters exist in the first place (see *How good are charter schools in the cities we studied?*).

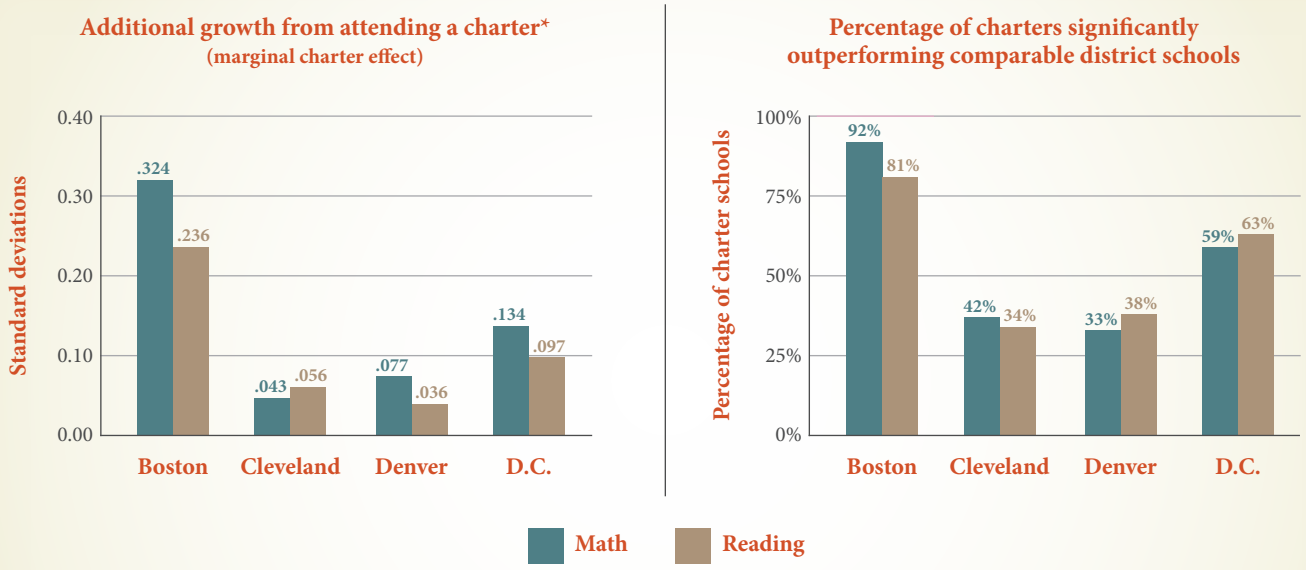
How good are charter schools in the cities we studied?

To gauge charter quality, we used the results of a recent study by Stanford University's CREDO Institute.[46] For each charter student in the cities it examined, CREDO identified up to seven "virtual peers" who attended traditional public schools and shared similar scores on prior tests and similar demographic characteristics. CREDO then analyzed performance data from 2006–07 through 2011–12 and compared the progress made by charter students (and schools) in the course of a year with the progress made by their virtual peers.

In each of our four sites, charter students outpaced those peers. However, charter students in Boston and Washington, D.C. outpaced students at district schools by a far greater margin than did charter pupils in Cleveland and Denver. In Boston, charter school students achieved more than twice as much growth as district students, and almost all charter schools outperformed their comparable district school; in Denver and Cleveland, only about one-third of charter schools demonstrated significantly greater achievement growth than comparable district schools.

continued...

How good are charter schools in the cities we studied? (continued)



* CREDO's report translates these standard deviations into estimated "days of additional learning" for the national sample but cautions against using them to interpret results for a single city. That said, to put these standard deviations into context, the gains from attending charters could range from about twenty-five days (for Denver students in reading) to more than 216 days (for Boston students in math).

Source: "Urban Charter School Study: Report on 41 Regions," graphs created from CREDO, 2014, retrieved June 24, 2015 from http://urbancharters.stanford.edu/summary.php.

2. The district is an authorizer.
Authorizing charters makes the district accountable for their success, in addition to giving it some control over their growth and quality—and thus easing its fears of losing substantial funding to the charter sector. As an authorizer, a district can more easily align some systems and functions between the sectors, such as enrollment, reporting, and accountability, which might otherwise be the subject of lengthy inter-sector negotiations. Whether the district does these things *with* charters or *to* them depends on its approach, as well as other factors (such as the extent of its legal authority); either way, authorizing makes district involvement in these sorts of issues more likely.

Of course, most of the benefits above are *possible* (rather than guaranteed) results of district authorizing, and charters face inherent risks when the district is the *sole* authorizer. In those cases, charters obviously have almost no choice but to play ball, even if there is no guarantee that the district will. Conversely, if charters have access to one or more alternative authorizers, they gain greater leverage in deciding whether and how to engage with the district.

This study includes two cases in which the district can authorize charters. In Cleveland, charters can choose among several authorizers. In Denver, the district is the sole authorizer, but the state can review and overturn district decisions upon appeal. In neither place does the district have the sort of absolute power that would allow it to dictate terms to charters—but it does have a stake in their success.

Takeaway 5: Competition doesn't necessarily compel engagement.

As charters gain market share, districts experience several kinds of pressure that might encourage them to engage:

1. **Financial pressure:** When families choose to enroll their children in charter schools, the district typically loses the state and federal funding that those students generate.[47] The resulting financial pressures are strongest where charter-driven losses are large enough to push the district to take significant action, such as closing schools or downsizing central office staff. Smaller districts also tend to feel these pressures more acutely because they have less flexibility (see *Enrollment trends,* page 21).

2. **Logistical pressure:** As charter market share grows, families may face new logistical challenges that can only be addressed if the district and charters agree to coordinate. For example, the proliferation of school choices can make it difficult for parents to navigate the enrollment process. Similarly, finding manageable transportation becomes more complicated when families have more choices, including options that are across town. Plus, shrinking district enrollment can make it harder for the district to efficiently serve students in all neighborhoods, as enrollment losses occur in small numbers in many places.

3. **Academic pressure:** High-performing charters exert pressure on the district to improve academic outcomes or risk losing students in search of a better education.

The *existence* of competitive pressure is fairly predictable, but its impact on engagement is not. For example:

- In Washington, D.C., the sheer size of the charter sector has encouraged coordination on logistical issues like the enrollment process (which had grown absurdly complex prior to the creation of a common enrollment system). But on other issues, the district has had little incentive to work with charters.

- In Boston, despite the fact that the statewide charter cap limits fiscal and logistical pressures, the district has been willing to engage. In this case, interviewees suggested that the temporary absence of these pressures actually made the district more willing to engage because they mitigated the amount of pressure that charters could exert. However, some interviewees also speculated that the district may have engaged preemptively, under the assumption that the cap would eventually be lifted.

- Finally, in Houston and other cities, there is so far little indication that a large or growing charter sector has pushed the district to engage. Whether this trend can continue, or if these cities will eventually reach a scale that compels greater engagement, is unclear.

Putting the pieces together: How different factors contribute to engagement

The events, leaders, third-party stakeholders, and other factors that impact district-charter engagement came together to produce a unique set of engagement outcomes in each of our four cities. Below, we describe the key factors in each city and the engagement activities that they encouraged (see Table 6):

- Protectionism Under Pressure: In **Boston**, an influential mayor with an interest in having the district and charters work together to serve the city's students seized the opportunity to make the city a Gates compact site. In the short term, the charter cap protects the district from heavy competitive pressure, creating a safe space for limited engagement on enrollment and transportation. It also allows district-created school choices to proliferate. But this, in the long term, reduces pressure on the district to engage in more transformative ways with fully autonomous charters.

- Cultural and Economic Exchange: In **Cleveland**, the threat of state takeover pushed Mayor Frank Jackson to stake his political career on a plan to transform the city's schools. Third-party stakeholders encouraged him to incorporate

provisions that promoted district-charter engagement and helped push the plan through the state legislature. As part of the Cleveland Plan, the district partners with some charters to exchange instructional practices and includes them in its accountability score; it also shares with them a portion of local levy proceeds.

- Trading Partners: In **Denver**, after an embarrassing exposé created a pretext for change, successive superintendents and school boards committed to partnering with charters to grow the supply of high-quality schools and improve student access. Other factors, including the district's role as authorizer and pressure from external organizations, have also supported deeper engagement. Consequently, DPS and the city's charters engage to some extent in all of the activities on our list.
- Superpower Summit: In **Washington, D.C.**, a charter sector that has reached a tipping point has prompted collaboration on logistical issues, and the sectors have successfully implemented a new, unified enrollment system and agreed to report the same data relative to student demographics and school performance. The new mayor is pushing for greater collaboration; but compromise on issues related to equitable access remains elusive, and the path forward is unclear.

Table 6. Summary of engagement factors and activities

City	Factors	Activities
Boston	• Opportunity to be a Gates compact site • Strong mayoral leadership • Foundation support • No district stake in charter success	• Improving communication as the foundation for future engagement efforts • Coordinating transportation to improve operational efficiency
Cleveland	• Threat of state takeover • Strong mayoral leadership • Support of local organizations and state policy makers • Accountability and authorizing incentivize engagement	• Improving communication by inviting a broad array of representatives from both sectors to come together via the city's Gates compact work • Providing incentives, including a portion of local levy funds, for high-performing charters to align with the district
Denver	• Exposé on district enrollment • Strong district leadership • NGO and foundation support • Accountability and authorizing incentivize engagement	• Implementing (partially or fully) all of the engagement activities on our list
Washington, D.C.	• Logistical pressure from a charter sector at the tipping point • Cautious district leadership • Limited pressure from third-party stakeholders • No district stake in charter success	• Implementing systems aimed at improving coordination between the sectors, including common enrollment system • Improving communication and working to address issues of equitable access through the Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force, launched in summer 2015

In each of these sites, at least some factors supported some engagement. In contrast, all the factors that can encourage district-charter engagement appeared absent in Houston (see *Isolationism in Houston: a tale of two sectors*).

Isolationism in Houston: a tale of two sectors

At the start of this study, we planned to count Houston among our cases. After all, KIPP and YES Prep grew out of the Houston Independent School District with the blessing of then-Superintendent Rod Paige. But after numerous interviews and hours of online research, we concluded that there is little to no district-charter engagement occurring there.[48] The two sectors operate largely in isolation, and the factors that support district-charter engagement appear mostly absent:

No catalyzing event

Charter market share has been growing within HISD boundaries, but enrollment in HISD has remained relatively flat over the last few years and has not been sapped by charter attendance. As a result, charters are not exerting strong financial or logistical pressure on the district, and there is no sense of crisis. To the contrary, HISD has received a number of accolades since Terry Grier became superintendent in 2009; the sentiment is that it should keep doing what it's doing.[49]

Disinterested district leadership

Superintendent Grier has focused on improving the schools that HISD runs to compete with charters, rather than building partnerships with them. Perhaps seeing charter competition as a call to action rather than a direct threat, Grier said in his 2010 "state of the schools" speech, "We're not afraid of your competition. Please rest assured, we will not sit idly by and watch our parents leave failing schools to go to charters in their neighborhood that are getting the kinds of results that our children deserve and that we are not producing."

Limited pressure from third-party stakeholders

According to several interviewees, few organizations are pushing HISD to engage with the city's charters. For example, reform advocates founded "The CORE" in 2010 to mobilize families politically, but not with the aim of supporting engagement. The city's biggest funders have either given HISD support for specific projects, supported charters directly, or invested outside of Houston, rather than using their resources to influence district policy.

No district stake in charters' success

Currently, the state authorizes the vast majority of charter schools operating within HISD boundaries, and there is no mechanism for HISD to count their results in its Texas accountability score. Consequently, the district has little reason to view charters as anything other than the competition.

Charters are OK going it alone

If charters in Houston were clamoring for engagement, perhaps the circumstances would be different. But charter schools in the city have managed to address their own challenges, find facilities, and grow with the aid of local philanthropy and a willing non-district authorizer (the Texas Education Agency). With little demand for engagement by the charters, the district's lack of interest seals the deal for isolationism.

DISCUSSION

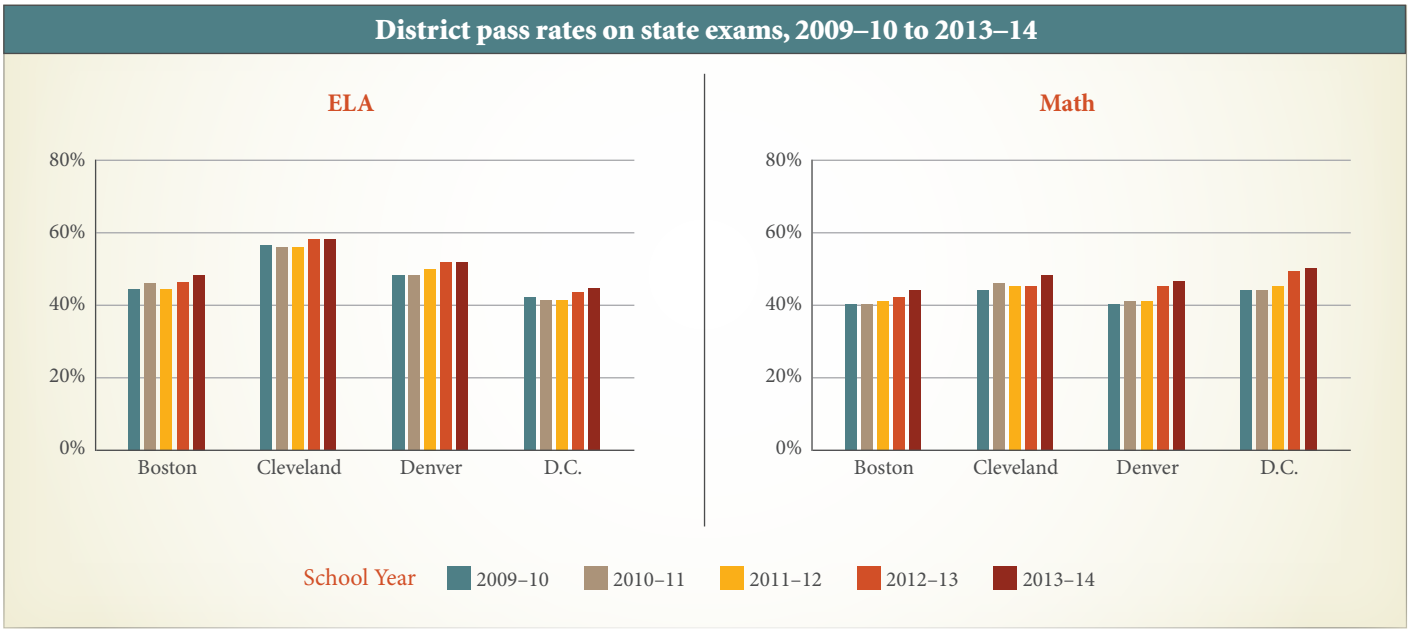
Engagement is only a means to an end. Consequently, it should be judged based on the results it achieves. Below, we investigate the evidence that district-charter engagement is having an impact on student achievement, as well as other measures of success.

What we don't know

It's unclear how we should expect the kinds of engagement efforts profiled in this report to affect student outcomes. What kinds of improvement should we anticipate? And how much? Over how long?

Even if we had an appropriate metric for success, however, our assessment of district-charter engagement would be limited by the fact that it does not happen in a vacuum. For example, in Denver, supporting and growing charters is just a small part of the district's larger reform strategy,[50] which mostly focuses on broader priorities like leadership, teaching, school flexibility, and early childhood education. Moreover, Denver's district reforms have proceeded in parallel with various state and federal policies and programs, as well as philanthropic initiatives, most of which aim to boost student achievement. Consequently, performance gains in Denver and elsewhere could be a result of any number of simultaneous improvement efforts, making it difficult to definitively link them to district-charter engagement. As shown in Figure 2, performance is improving slowly across the four sites, though we do not know how much district-charter engagement drives those gains, if at all.

Figure 2. Is student performance improving?



Still, even if we don't know whether engagement efforts are leading to gains in student performance, there are promising signs that they are moving the needle in the right direction—and others that suggest engagement is producing more hype than hope.

Promising signs

Across our sites, four signs indicate that engagement efforts may be having an impact.

1. **District and charter leaders report having better relationships.** In Boston, Denver, and Washington, D.C., interviewees from both sectors told us that communication between them has improved. They speak more regularly, trust each other more, and feel like they can reach out to someone in the other sector if the need arises. As a charter operator in Boston explained, "Now when we [charters] run into challenges with busing, we have a direct link to BPS and actual people who really care about our requests."

2. **Cities and districts are hiring former charter leaders for key education positions.** In all four cities, former charter leaders now hold top positions within the district or in a city-level education office (see Table 7). Still more come from charter-friendly reform organizations. Though it is not the responsibility of these individuals to represent the charter cause in their new roles, their growing presence means there is often someone within the traditional education or government bureaucracy who understands and is sympathetic to the challenges charters face.[51] These new hires also likely improve the relationship alluded to above.

Table 7. District and city education leaders with a charter background

City	Current position	Name	Charter background
Boston	Mayor	Martin Walsh	• Co-founded a charter school and served on the school's board
	Superintendent	Tommy Chang	• Served as a charter school principal
	Boston School Committee member	Meg Campbell	• Founder and executive director of Codman Academy charter school in Boston
Cleveland	Executive director of charter schools	Stephanie Klupinski	• Worked for the Ohio Alliance of Public Charter Schools and Hawaii's Public Charter School Commission
Denver	Chief academic and innovation officer	Alyssa Whitehead-Bust	• Supported the start-up of more than fifteen charter schools • Served as founding principal of Denver charter school Highline Academy
Washington, D.C.	Former deputy mayor for education	Abigail Smith	• Served as chair of the board for E. L. Haynes charter schools • Worked with D.C. charters as a consultant to facilitate a common charter enrollment system
	Current deputy mayor for education	Jennifer Niles	• Served as director of Connecticut's charter school office • Founded E. L. Haynes charter schools in Washington, D.C.

3. **A few examples of lower operational costs and improved service have emerged.** In Boston, BPS has reduced its annual busing costs by $2 million by coordinating with charters, and some charter leaders report that transportation services have improved in the process. Similarly, an evaluation of a pilot charter busing program in Denver, Success Express, found that the new system saved approximately $670,000 per year while improving attendance rates and access to district-provided transportation.[52] In Washington, D.C. and Denver, survey and interview data indicate that common enrollment systems have led to greater transparency around admissions, better information about schools, and a more manageable enrollment process.[53]

4. **High-performing charters are replacing low-performing district schools in Denver.** According to an analysis conducted by the Donnell-Kay Foundation, student proficiency across Denver improved by eight percentage points between 2009 and 2013, driven largely by the closure of low-performing district schools and the opening of new, higher-performing charter schools.[54] The percentage of students attending a school that meets the city's quality benchmark also increased by ten percentage points. Though these gains are modest (and Denver is just one city), they nevertheless represent a step in the right direction—and show what is possible.

A long way to go

Much work remains if district-charter engagement efforts are to achieve their goals.

To date, progress has been slow, with most cities fully implementing just a handful of the engagement activities we identified. According to an interim evaluation of the Gates compact sites, for example, BPS and its charters are still "getting to know each other" nearly four years after signing their compact.[55] And while Denver is further along, many of the toughest issues related to equitable access and resource sharing remain unresolved. As two CRPE researchers explained in a recent blog post, "even a strongly collaborative city like Denver need[s] to find systemic solutions, not Band-Aids, for solving problems and capturing opportunities that arise when charter schools become a significant portion of a city's public school landscape." Meanwhile, in Cleveland, the district's charter partnerships have focused mostly on getting the right people around the table, rather than making progress toward shared goals. Finally, in Washington, D.C., DCPS and charters have reached a stalemate over whether and how to share responsibility for ensuring equitable access.

In our city quartet, for a variety of reasons, relatively few charter operators work closely with districts—in some cases, a subset of charters opts out, while in others, a district engages selectively. For example, just fourteen of Cleveland's fifty-five charters have formally partnered with the district, even though they would receive more funding if they were to engage.[56] Similarly, Denver interviewees report that only the "big three" charter networks (Denver School of Science and Technology, KIPP, and STRIVE) have a true working relationship with the district. Just one charter operator outside of the big three sits on the District-Charter Collaborative Council.

On the whole, our sites offer scant evidence that public education is transforming. But early signs indicate that change is afoot, and the recommendations below point the way toward more productive district-charter engagement.

The paths ahead

What is the best path forward for cities with a growing charter presence, given what we have learned about the challenges associated with getting districts and charters to work together?

In the long run, at least three options seem viable:

1. **Isolationism.** Maybe Houston has it right. Considering the challenges of productive engagement, it's tempting to conclude that the two sectors should just function separately (like the competitors they are). This is actually the path that most cities are taking. Yet it places a significant burden on taxpayers (who are forced to finance two systems) and families (who must navigate them). Additionally, it is possible that significant segments of the student population (especially those most at risk) will not be well served if the two sectors fail to coordinate.

2. **New world order.** Or perhaps New Orleans offers a glimpse of the future. There, charters operate the vast majority of schools, and the district (in this case, the state-created Recovery School District) serves as a portfolio manager, focusing on school oversight and accountability. The merits and drawbacks of an all-charter system are topics for another report, but the New Orleans example certainly highlights some tough questions about how the roles and responsibilities of charters would need to change if they became the sole providers of public education. Such a system would carry obvious implications for charter autonomy.

3. **Free trade zone.** The third path assumes that both sectors will continue to exist side by side, but gains are to be had by forging a closer relationship between the two. Achieving these gains, however, requires an approach that recognizes both sectors' inherent incentives to compete with one another—and confers greater benefits than their existing self-interests.

Finding such an approach is the goal of the recommendations to which we now turn.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We offer seven recommendations for district leaders, charter leaders, and third parties seeking to encourage more productive engagement between the two sectors.

For district leaders

1. **Choose your charter partners wisely.** Districts seeking to collaborate with charters shouldn't feel obligated to engage with every operator. Instead, they should focus their time, energy, and resources on the highest-performing charters with the greatest capacity to do right by kids. Being selective sends a message that the district prioritizes quality and undercuts low-performing charters that taint public education.

2. **Open the door for facilities.** If districts want charters to take greater responsibility for ensuring that all students have access to high-quality schools, they will need to do more to help them fulfill this responsibility. One obvious approach would be to offer charters access to facilities in underserved areas in exchange for their cooperation on certain access issues, such as neighborhood preferences or mid-year transfers (backfilling). Facilities-hungry charter operators can decide on a case-by-case basis if they are being offered a square deal or a bargain they'll regret.

For charter leaders

3. **Be pragmatic. Be creative. Cut a deal.** It's critical that charters preserve those qualities that distinguish them from traditional public schools and allow them to thrive. However, as charter market share grows, so does the need for the two sectors to coordinate. Evidence from cities such as New Orleans and Denver suggests there may be room for compromise on some practices once considered critical to charter success, such as allowing for limited neighborhood preference or mid-year transfers.

4. **Make yourself valuable.** Charters can make themselves more indispensable to the district by:
   - Working with state policy makers so the district can count charter performance in its accountability metric in instances where the district and charters reach an agreement to do so (e.g., in exchange for access to a district facility or levy dollars), as has happened in Cleveland and Denver.
   - Turning out voters (within the limits of their 501(c)(3) status) to support bond issues that will benefit both the district and the charter sector.
   - Seeking out opportunities to earn funding and/or good publicity for both charters and the district, such as the Gates compact initiative has provided.
   - Offering to fill problematic niches by serving specific neighborhoods or student groups.

For outside influencers

5. **Push for policy solutions.** Outside influencers should use their resources to support policies that encourage district and charter leaders to work together. To this end, they should:
   - Advocate for policies that increase the long-term competitive pressure charters can put on the district. Such policies might include removing caps on the number of charter schools, enabling non-district authorizers, and requiring districts to share resources with charters, including local funding and facilities.
   - Provide political cover for leaders of both sectors to take risks by demanding change or threatening consequences.

6. **Rally the troops.** Absent a policy solution, outside influencers should push, prod, and cajole decision makers toward engagement and:
    - Harness the power of the purse to support engagement activities directly (e.g., Gates compact initiative) or indirectly (e.g., providing opportunities for leaders to see how similar initiatives are working in other cities, publishing articles to raise awareness).
    - Support reform-minded leaders, such as school board members or mayors who want to engage charters, and press them to hire superintendents who share their perspective.
    - Raise awareness by publicizing missed opportunities and their impact on kids, as well as describing the need for change.

For all

7. **Protect existing engagement efforts from political change.** Because charters are still controversial in many communities, the views of tomorrow's governor, legislators, superintendent, school board, or mayor may not be consistent with today's engagement activities. Consequently, when the stars align and the two sectors are able to work with one another, it's worth trying to institutionalize the results through binding multi-year contracts or new policies that are harder to reverse than simple agreements between parties. Working with outside organizations to build a durable constituency for engagement can help.

CONCLUSION

Done well, district-charter engagement can produce multiple benefits. It can help districts manage the operational and financial challenges that accompany a growing charter sector and meet the needs of their students. It can give charter schools increased access to facilities and local tax dollars. It can provide taxpayers with more efficient education systems. And it just might increase the supply of great schools.

But in a world where organizations make decisions based on self-interest, it is rare that events, people, and conditions align in ways that make significant engagement worth the risk. Just as relations between nations advance in fits and starts, with episodes of exchange, détente, isolationism, and war, we can expect all of the above as charters and districts play out their own form of geopolitics. When the sectors engage at all, they often do so in ways that fall short of their own goals. So long as both sectors continue to exist side by side, however, policy makers must continue to search for a way to foster a more productive coexistence.

Endnotes

1. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "Estimated Number of Public Charter Schools & Students, 2014–15," February 2015, http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/open_closed_FINAL.pdf.
2. J. Williams, "Games Charter Opponents Play," *Education Next* 7, no 1 (Winter 2007), http://educationnext.org/games-charter-opponents-play/.
3. In Houston, we found too little engagement of any kind between the district and charters to warrant a full case study.
4. In Donnell-Kay's 2015 report, "Beyond Averages," the author defines a high-quality school as any school that received at least 70 percent of available points on the district's School Performance Framework. See A. Ooms, "Beyond Averages: School Quality in Denver Public Schools" (Denver, CO: Donnell-Kay Foundation, 2014), http://dkfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Beyond%20Averages-School%20Quality%20in%20DPS-FINAL.pdf.
5. NAPCS, "Estimated Number of Public Charter Schools & Students, 2014–15."
6. J. Williams, "Games Charter Opponents Play."
7. NAPCS, "A Growing Movement: America's Largest Charter School Communities," December 2014, http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2014_Enrollment_Share_FINAL.pdf.
8. N. Kern and W. Gebru, "Waiting Lists to Attend Charter Schools Top 1 Million Names" (Washington, D.C.: NAPCS, December 2014), http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/NAPCS-2014-Wait-List-Report.pdf.
9. See "Urban Charter School Study: Report on 41 Regions" (Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2015), http://urbancharters.stanford.edu/download/Urban%20Charter%20School%20Study%20Report%20on%2041%20Regions.pdf.
10. In cities where the district is the sole authorizer of multiple charters with multiple operators (e.g., Baltimore and Chicago), the district may have less flexibility to selectively engage.
11. See for example: G. M. Holmes et al., "Does School Choice Increase School Quality?" NBER Working Paper Series (No.W9683), 2003; K. Booker et al., "The Effect of Charter Schools on Traditional Public School Students in Texas: Are Children Who Stay Behind Left Behind?" (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University, September 2005), http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/OP104.pdf; J. Bohte, "Examining the Impact of Carter Schools on Performance in Traditional Public Schools," *Policy Studies Journal* 32, no. 4 (November 2004), 501–520; T. R. Sass, "Charter Schools and Student Achievement in Florida," *Education Finance and Policy* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2006), 91– 122; C. M. Hoxby, "School Choice and School Productivity: Could School Choice Be a Tide that Lifts All Boats?" in C. M. Hoxby (ed.), *The Economics of Choice* (Washington D.C., National Bureau of Economic Research and University of Chicago Press, 2003); M. A. Winters, "Everyone Wins: How Charter Schools Benefit All New York City Public School Students" (No. 60) (New York, NY: Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2009), http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_60.htm.
12. R. Buddin and R. Zimmer, "Is Charter School Competition in California Improving the Performance of Traditional Public Schools?" (No. WR-297-EDU) (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005); E. P. Bettinger, "The Effect of Charter Schools on Charter Student and Public Schools," *Economics of Education Review* 24, no. 2 (2005), 133–147; R. Bifulco and H. F. Ladd, "The Impacts of Charter Schools on Student Achievement: Evidence from North Carolina," *Education Finance and Policy* 1, no. 1 (2006), 50–89; M. Carr and G. Ritter, "Measuring the Competitive Effect of Charter Schools on Student Achievement in Ohio's Traditional Public Schools" (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas, 2007); Y. Ni, "Do Traditional Public Schools Benefit from Charter School Competition? Evidence from Michigan" (No. 145) (New York: National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Columbia University, 2007).
13. For example, see E. Rofes, "How are School Districts Responding to Charter Laws and Charter Schools? A Study of Eight States and the District of Columbia" *Policy Analysis for California Education* (April 1998), http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED424648; J. Ericson and D. Silverman (2001); M. Holley et al., "Competition with Charters Motivates Districts," *Education Next* 13, no. 4 (Fall 2013), http://educationnext.org/competition-with-charters-motivates-districts/.
14. S. Yatsko et al., "District-charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report" (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), June 2013), http://www.crpe.org/publications/district-charter-collaboration-compact-interim-report; S. Gill and S. Yatsko, "The Charter-district Relationship: Is Generating Goodwill Enough?" (Seattle, WA: CRPE, May 5, 2015,) http://www.crpe.org/thelens/charter-district-relationship-generating-goodwill-enough.

15. For example, see: T. Ely and P. Teske, "Success Express: Transportation innovation in Denver Public Schools" (Denver, CO: University of Colorado, Center for Education Policy Analysis, February 2014), http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/MHC_Success_Express_2014.pdf; B. Gross and P. Denice, "An Evaluation of Denver's SchoolChoice process, 2012–2014: Is the Enrollment System Working for Families?" (Seattle, WA: CRPE, January 2015), http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-brief-evaluation-denver-schoolchoice_process.pdf; B. Gross et al., "Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice: Early Evidence from Denver and New Orleans" (Seattle, WA: CRPE, May 2015), http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe-brief-common-enrollment-denver-nola.pdf.
16. As it turned out, one of the sites we studied, Houston Independent School District (HISD), had very little district-charter engagement of which to speak. However, it became an interesting counter-point to the others, which we include in a sidebar on page 29.
17. Caveat: Our goal for this report was to identify trends and examples across the sites that could provide guidance for education leaders interested in advancing the district-charter relationship in their cities. The cases offer a number of valuable lessons, but they are just cases, and the takeaways do not necessarily apply to every district.
18. Sources: Massachusetts Department of Education, http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/ enroll/default.html?yr=1011; Ohio Department of Education; Denver Public Schools, "Current and Historical Enrollment: 2014–15," http://planning.dpsk12.org/enrollment-reports/standard-reports; District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, "Historical Enrollment – Public Schools," https://data.dcpcsb.org/Enrollment-/Historial-Enrollment-Public-Schools/3db5-ujzr.
19. Figure includes Commonwealth charter schools only. In addition, six Horace Mann charter schools operated in Boston in 2014–15. Horace Mann charter schools must receive approval from local committees and, in most cases, the teachers' unions. In addition, Horace Mann charter schools receive funding through the local school district and must submit a budget request to the superintendents and school committee each year. In contrast, Commonwealth charter schools are completely independent of local school committees. For more on the different types of charters operating in Boston, see the Boston profile in this report.
20. The goals and activities were gleaned from interviews, public documents, and publications about CRPE's portfolio districts and Gates compact cities. We looked for common factors, including events, individuals (e.g., district and charter leaders, politicians, philanthropies) and conditions (e.g., enrollment trends, authorizing authority) that seemed to influence whether and how districts engaged charters in each city.
21. NAPCS, "2014 Overview of the State of Charter Authorizing," 2015, http://www.qualitycharters.org/assets/files/Documents/Publications/NACSA_2015OverviewReport_FINAL.pdf.
22. The one exception is New Orleans, where the local school district is just one provider among many and serves a relatively small fraction of students.
23. CRPE, "Seven Components of a Portfolio Strategy," http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/Brief_PSDP_Strategy.pdf.
24. C. Campbell and J. Posamentier, "Front-Runners and Dark Horses: How Districts are Faring on Portfolio Strategy Implementation" (Seattle, WA: CRPE, June 17, 2015), http://www.crpe.org/thelens/front-runners-and-dark-horses-how-districts-are-faring-portfolio-strategy-implementation.
25. See, for example, the evidence that the Charter School Facilities Initiative has gathered on the issue, available at http://facilitiesinitiative.org/.
26. Special education, alternative education, finance, serving ELLs, and Office of School Reform and Innovation (OSRI) advisory.
27. S. Yatsko et al., "District-charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report."
28. In determining whether a district has fully implemented an activity or only gotten part of the way there, we looked for evidence that it had made a reasonable attempt to do the activity well and include a critical mass of the individuals who should be involved. For example, all of the initiatives aimed at improving instructional practices across sectors included only a handful of school employees from either section, making it unlikely that the best ideas from one sector will penetrate the other, as the goal intends.
29. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, "Gates Foundation Invests Nearly $25 Million in Seven Cities Dedicated to Bold Collaboration between Public Charter and Traditional Schools," press release, http://www.gatesfoundation.org/media-center/press-releases/2012/12/gates-foundation-invests-nearly-25-million-in-seven-cities.

30. Sources: Massachusetts Department of Education, http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/ enroll/default.html?yr=1011; Ohio Department of Education; Denver Public Schools, "Current and Historical Enrollment: 2014–15," http://planning.dpsk12.org/enrollment-reports/standard-reports; District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, "Historical Enrollment – Public Schools," https://data.dcpcsb.org/Enrollment-/Historial-Enrollment-Public-Schools/3db5-ujzr.
31. State law specifies the number of Commonwealth charter schools that are allowed statewide and, via spending limits, the number of students who can be enrolled in charter schools in any given district. In 2010, the law was amended to double the number of charter students permitted in the state's lowest-performing districts, from about 9 percent to 18 percent of public school students. Since then, seven "proven" school operators have been granted charters to expand their operations in Boston. As of early 2013, virtually all of the new seats authorized for Boston under the 2010 amendment have been approved by BESE, leaving no room for additional growth in city charters. See J. A. Peyser, "Boston and the Charter School Cap," *Education Next* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2014), http://educationnext.org/boston-and-the-charter-school-cap/.
32. Mayoral control means slightly different things in each of our cities. In Boston, the school committee appoints the superintendent, but the mayor appoints the School Committee from a list of candidates recommended by a thirteen-member Citizens Nominating Panel composed of parents, teachers, principals, and representatives of business and higher education. In Cleveland, the board of education consists of nine voting members appointed by the mayor of Cleveland from a slate of nominees selected by a local nominating panel. Then the board, with the concurrence of the mayor, appoints the chief executive officer of the school district. In Washington, D.C., the mayor appoints the schools chancellor, who reports directly to the mayor.
33. Charters also agree to participate in the Cleveland Quality Schools Network, where district and charter schools share best practices and collaborate.
34. J. Zubrzycki, "Denver Elections Could Lead to Unified School Board During Time of Change," *Chalkbeat Colorado*, July 9, 2015, http://co.chalkbeat.org/2015/07/09/denver-elections-could-lead-to-unified-school-board-during-time-of-change/#.VaWYQ_lVikp.
35. A new mayor took office in Washington, D.C. in 2015, but she requested that the current chancellor, Kaya Henderson, stay. Meanwhile, the new deputy mayor of education that she appointed, Jennifer Niles, took the position after founding and leading a D.C. charter school. Boston recently elected a new mayor and a new superintendent, both of whom have personal experience with charter schools (see Table 7 on page 31). All of the district and charter representatives that negotiated the Boston Compact have also been replaced.
36. A. Short and Y. Gonen, "DeBlasio Says he Won't Allow Co-locations for Charter Schools," *New York Post*, February 4, 2014, http://nypost.com/2014/02/04/de-blasio-says-he-wont-allow-co-locations-for-charter-schools/.
37. E Prep was the first charter school the district authorized.
38. The Fordham Institute authorizes one other school in the Breakthrough network.
39. CMSD formally partners with fourteen charter schools, including eight that it authorizes and an additional six that it does not. Partner charter schools must participate in the Cleveland Quality Schools Network, administer the Conditions for Learning student survey, and allow the district to count its enrollment and performance in the district's state accountability score. Charters interested in partnering with the district must submit a twelve-part application aimed at evaluating the school's alignment with the goals of the Cleveland Plan and committing to a number of shared principles. The application is available on CMSD's website at http://clevelandmetroschools.org/cms/lib05/OH01915844/Centricity/Domain/2528/CommunitySchoolPartnershipApplication10.31.14.pdf.
40. We do not include mayors in this group if the district is under mayoral control. In those instances, we discuss the role the mayor plays under district leadership.
41. The most significant of these provisions—granting a new Cleveland Transformation Alliance the authority to approve any new charter seeking to operate in the city—was eventually dropped from the bill.
42. C. Candinsky, "Kasich Hails Cleveland School Plan," *Columbus Dispatch*, March 13, 2012, http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2012/03/13/cleveland-school-plan-hailed.html.
43. *Plain Dealer* Editorial Board, "The Plan Finally Wins Out," *Plain Dealer*, June 13, 2012, http://www.cleveland.com/opinion/index.ssf/2012/06/the_jackson_plan_finally_wins.html.
44. For example, Donnell-Kay, A+ Denver, Get Smart Schools, and the Colorado League of Charter Schools.

45. Currently CMSD partners with six charters that it does not authorize. As part of this partnership, charters agree to allow CMSD to include their enrollment data noted separately on the district's report card and to have their academic performance data combined with comparable data from CMSD schools for the district's state report card. Partner schools also agree to administer a Conditions of Learning survey and are part of the Cleveland Quality Schools Network, where district and charter schools network, share best practices, and collaborate. For more, see CMSD, "CMSD and Charter School Partnership," http://www.clevelandmetroschools.org/Page/6142.
46. CREDO, "Urban Charter School Study: Report on 41 Regions."
47. It is important to note that districts generally do not share local funding, however. So when a student leaves a district school in favor of a charter, total funding per pupil may actually be higher.
48. HISD has made a big push to implement the best charter practices within district schools, however. In 2010, Houston launched "Apollo 20," a plan to transform twenty low-performing district schools by implementing five practices researcher Roland Fryer identified as key to charter success: an effective principal and effective teachers, more instructional time, use of data to drive instruction, in-school tutoring, and a culture of high expectations. For more on Apollo 20, see the district's website, http://www.houstonisd.org/Page/78350.
49. HISD received the Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2013 and was also one of twenty-one districts and charter management organizations to win a Race to the Top district grant, earning the district nearly $30 million. In addition, Superintendent Grier won the Council of the Great City Schools Urban Educator of the Year Green-Garner Award in 2014, and *Education Week* named him a "Leader to Learn From" in 2015.
50. Denver Public Schools, "Denver Plan 2020: Every Child Succeeds," http://denverplan.dpsk12.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Denver-Plan-2020-Final.pdf.
51. S. Yatsko and A. Bruns, "The Best of Both Worlds: School District-Charter Sector Boundary Spanners" (Seattle, WA: CRPE, August 2015), http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe_boundary_spanners_final.pdf.
52. T. Ely and P. Teske, "Success Express."
53. B. Gross et al., "Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice: Early Evidence from Denver and New Orleans"; B. Gross and P. Denice, "An Evaluation of Denver's SchoolChoice process, 2012–2014."
54. A. Ooms, "Beyond Averages."
55. S. Yatsko et al., "District-charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report."
56. However, a major goal of the Gates compact work is to develop a relationship between CMSD and a broader array of charter operators. That work is just beginning, however. The city is aiming to finalize and sign the compact by the end of 2015.

CASE STUDIES

BOSTON: PROTECTIONISM UNDER PRESSURE

Overview

Boston's district-charter relationship took a potentially significant turn in 2011, when an influential mayor seized the opportunity for the city to become a Gates compact site.[1] Since then, the district and charters have created opportunities for school staff to work with and learn from one another, and the district has cut nearly $2 million per year from its transportation costs by coordinating with charters. It has also made three of its buildings available to charters.

Boston is a story of protectionism under pressure. Currently, the statewide charter cap in Massachusetts functions like a protective tariff, shielding the district from charter competition. In the short term, protectionism creates space for limited engagement, in this case centering on logistics. It also fosters the proliferation of in-district school choices, which, in the long term, reduces pressure to engage in more transformative ways. But this protectionism is under pressure. As charters demonstrate success and political winds shift, perhaps there's a future in which something closer to free trade emerges.

Table 1. Boston snapshot

2014–15 facts and figures	
Charter market share	18%
Number of charter schools*	26
Charter enrollment	10,155
District enrollment	56,757
Number of authorizers	1
District is an authorizer	No
District governance	Mayoral control
Gates compact site	Yes
CRPE Portfolio Network	Yes

* Includes Commonwealth charter schools only, see Boston's autonomous schools below

Enrollment trends		
Year	Boston Public Schools	Boston Charters*
10–11	56,578	5,519
11–12	55,410	5,930
12–13	55,656	7,146
13–14	54,522	8,464
14–15	56,757	10,155
5-Yr Change	+179	4,636
Percent Change	+0.3%	+84.0%

*Includes Commonwealth charter schools only

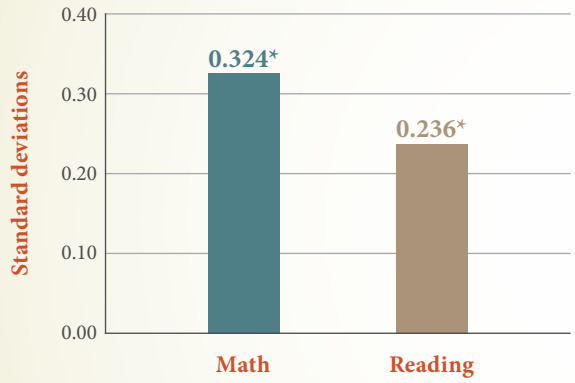
Source: Massachusetts Department of Education, retrieved June 29, 2015 from http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/ enroll/default.html?yr=1011.

continued...

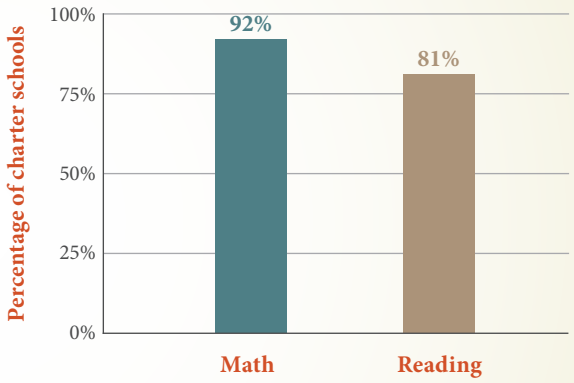
Table 1. Boston snapshot (continued)

Charter schools v. traditional public schools[2] 2006–07 through 2011–12

Additional average growth from attending a Boston charter (marginal charter effect)



Average percentage of Boston charters significantly outperforming district schools

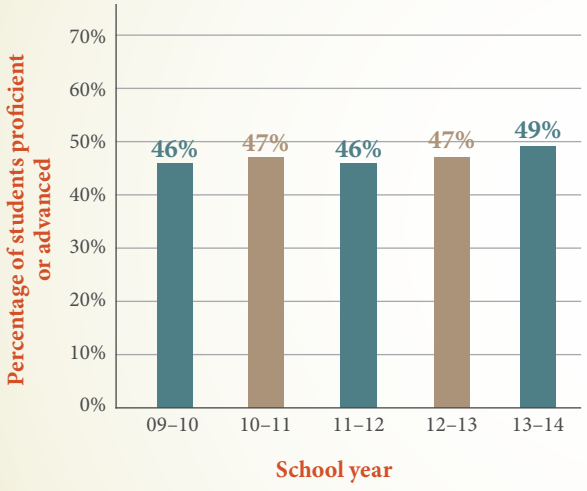


* In CREDO's national sample, these levels of growth would equate to more than 216 days and about 169 days of additional learning per year in math and reading, respectively. CREDO cautions that these national calculations may not apply exactly to data on one city, so we offer them only as a point of reference.

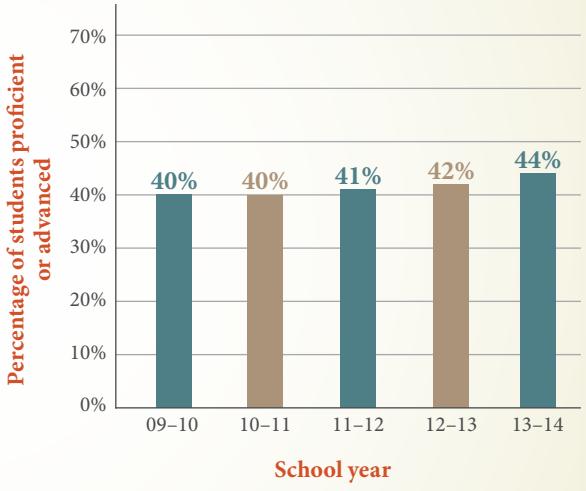
Source: "Urban Charter School Study: Report on 41 Regions," graphs created from CREDO, 2014, retrieved June 24, 2015 from http://urbancharters.stanford.edu/summary.php.

Change in BPS performance, 2009–10 to 2013–14*

ELA



Math



*District performance does not include Horace Mann charter schools.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education, "MCAS Achievement," retrieved June 30, 2015 from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/mcas.aspx.

How BPS and charter schools are engaging

Historically, Boston Public Schools (BPS) and the fully autonomous Commonwealth charter schools operating in that city have had a contentious relationship (see *Boston's autonomous schools*). However, since becoming a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation compact site in 2011, the two sectors have embarked on a number of activities aimed at improving their relationship.[3] As participants in this initiative, the district and the city's sixteen charter operators developed and signed a compact outlining how they would collaborate (see *Key Boston Compact agreements*).[4] In return, the Gates Foundation awarded Boston a $100,000 planning grant to start the compact work, and an additional $3.25 million in 2012 to expand it.[5] The compact's steering committee distributes funds (to both district and charter schools), selects the schools that participate in cross-sector partnerships, and oversees initiatives funded by the compact. The steering committee is composed of representatives from Boston Public Schools, the City of Boston, the Archdiocese of Boston and its schools, and several charter school organizations.

Boston's autonomous schools

Four different types of autonomous or semi-autonomous schools operate in Boston, including two types of state-authorized charter schools and two types of district-operated schools.

Charter schools

When Massachusetts passed its charter school law in 1994, it established just one type of charter school. However, in 1997, the legislature amended the law to distinguish between two types:

- Commonwealth charter schools are completely independent of local school committees.
- Horace Mann charter schools, or "in-district" charters are state-authorized, but must also receive approval from local school boards and (in most cases) teachers' unions. These schools are funded by the local district and must submit a budget request to the superintendent and school committee each year.

In 2014–15, twenty-six Commonwealth charters and six Horace Mann charters operated in Boston. Throughout this chapter, the word "charters" refers only to Commonwealth charter schools unless otherwise specified. The distinction is consistent with this report's focus on engagement between districts and fully autonomous charters.

District-operated autonomous schools

Boston Public Schools operates two types of schools that enjoy a number of charter-like autonomies, including some flexibility over their budget, staffing, governance, and union contract rules:

- Pilot schools are unique to Boston and were created after Massachusetts passed its charter school law in 1995.
- Innovation schools were created by state legislation in 2010.

The local school board approves and holds the charter for both pilot and innovation schools. In 2014–15, the district operated twenty-two pilot schools and six innovation schools.[6]

Since agreeing to the compact, the district and charters have made progress on several of the goals it outlined, many of which overlap with the engagement goals identified in this report. For example, the two sectors now communicate regularly and know whom they can call if they have a question or concern. They've also established several programs for teachers to collaborate on instructional practices.

The district and charters have also joined in some efforts to achieve greater operational efficiency. For example, charters have adjusted their schedules to help BPS shave nearly $2 million off its annual busing costs (BPS is required to provide charter students transportation), and BPS has leased three empty buildings to charter operators.

Finally, the two sectors have taken preliminary steps toward a single enrollment system, such as aligning their enrollment calendars, inviting one another to annual school showcases where families can learn about different school options, and participating in the Boston Schools Hub, an online tool that allows families to search all BPS, charter, and Catholic school options by neighborhood.[7]

Despite these interactions, however, BPS and charters have made little progress in other areas (as Table 2 illustrates). For example, they do not report comparable performance data, and the district has not taken any concrete action to grow the supply of high-performing charters.

Key Boston Compact agreements

1. Mutually support the location of new charter schools in neighborhoods with greatest needs; district will explore leasing vacant or underutilized district buildings to charters.
2. Charter schools will help minimize district transportation costs.
3. Facilitate learning communities and shared professional development.
4. Identify a tool and establish a process for evaluating the efficacy of individual schools to make recommendations for expanding successful programs and closing schools as needed.
5. Increase the number of high-performing teachers and leaders joining district and charter public schools by working with a local degree-granting and/or residency program.

Excerpted from S. Yatsko et al., "District Charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report" (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2013), http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/compact_interim_report_6_2013_0.pdf. The actual compact can be found at http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/Boston_Compact_Dec11_0.pdf.

Table 2. Engagement activities in Boston

Goal	Activity	Example
IC	1. The district and charters establish official channels for communicating (e.g., working groups, steering committees, appointed representatives for different stakeholder groups).	Boston has been a Gates compact site since 2011. As part of that work, representatives from the district, the charter sector, and Catholic schools meet quarterly. In addition, subcommittees devoted to particular topics or goals meet as needed.
IP	2. The district and charters establish structured opportunities for school-level employees to share best practices and problem-solve around shared challenges (e.g., common professional development, working committees to discuss how best to implement Common Core or address ELL student needs).	• Nine schools (district, charter, and parochial) participate in "School Partnerships" in which groups of two or three schools from different sectors work together to improve student outcomes for historically underserved students.[8] • Over 160 educators from twenty-two district, charter, and Catholic schools participate in an initiative focused on improving instruction for English language learners.[9] • Members of the compact's steering committee awarded a small grant to two schools whose minority students experienced strong literacy growth. The schools used the funding to share their practices with schools from other sectors.[10] • BPS opened special education professional development to charter school teachers.[11]
OE	3. The district and charters work together to lower the cost of providing key services (e.g., transportation, purchasing, special education, and facilities utilization and maintenance).	• By aligning their busing schedules with the district's timetable, charters helped the district reduce its transportation costs by approximately $2 million a year. • In 2012, BPS leased three empty school buildings to charter schools, generating revenue for the district and providing for charter schools cost-efficient facilities in a city that lacks them. • BPS is also looking for opportunities to offer charters access to bulk purchasing.[12]
EA	4. The district and charters report the same data metrics such that comparable, transparent and timely information relative to student demographics and school performance is available publicly.	No concrete action has been taken to date, though in the Boston Compact, both sectors commit to making public and sharing "institutional data regarding student demographics (such as ELL, students in special education or foster care, students who are homeless, and survivors of violence), mobility and achievement."[13]
EA	5. The district and charters participate in a common and coordinated enrollment system.	No, but compact partners have stated that this is a goal of the compact work and have taken preliminary steps to facilitate its creation, including: • BPS and the city's charters have aligned their enrollment calendars. • BPS now invites charters to participate in their school showcase, and vice versa. • Boston School Hub, an initiative of the Boston Compact, allows families to search all available BPS, charter, and Catholic school options by neighborhood.[14]

continued...

Table 2. Engagement activities in Boston (continued)

Goal	Activity	Example
EA	6. The district and charters coordinate to ensure that all students have access to high-quality school options regardless of their location or educational needs (e.g., strategically siting new schools, providing students free and convenient transportation to any public school).	BPS leased three district facilities to existing high-performing charters in a neighborhood where few high-quality school options existed. In exchange, the charters committed to serving children living nearby.
QS	7. The district shares resources with charters, including local levy dollars and/or facilities, to make it easier for them to operate.	Although the district has leased three facilities to charter schools, its primary goal has been to provide the students in those neighborhoods with high-quality options rather than to increase the supply of high-quality schools across the city. (The total number of charters has not changed as a result of the district's actions.)
QS	8. The district actively works to grow the supply of high-quality charter schools in the city (e.g., recruiting new high-performing schools, advocating for the state to lift charter caps, asking city and local officials to take specific actions).	Although Boston has supported the growth of in-district schools of choice, such as innovation and pilot schools, the city has not taken steps to grow high-quality Commonwealth charters. Former Mayor Menino advocated maintaining the cap on Commonwealth charters and expanding Horace Mann charters (which are capped at forty-eight schools statewide). The city's current mayor, Martin Walsh, has repeatedly declared his support for lifting the charter school cap and increasing charter school funding, but neither has happened yet.

Goal of engagement
IC – Improve communication
IP – Improve practice
OE – Improve operational efficiencies
EA – Improve equitable access of existing schools for families
QS – Increase supply of high-quality schools across the city

Extent of engagement
Fully implemented | Partially implemented | Not implemented

The factors shaping district-charter engagement

In Boston, three factors have played a primary role in shaping district-charter engagement: mayoral leadership, the statewide cap on fully autonomous charter schools, and BPS's own pilot and innovation schools.

The role of the mayor

Since 1991, Boston Public Schools has been under mayoral control, and from 1993 to 2014, Thomas Menino was the mayor. For much of his tenure, Menino opposed charters, arguing that they undermined district finances and "creamed" students.[15] But over time his position shifted—perhaps (some local observers suggested) because his grandchildren enrolled in charter schools, or perhaps because federal incentives changed.

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education established Race to the Top, a $5 billion grant program that rewarded states for implementing a number of education reforms, including charter schools. In response, Menino asked the Massachusetts Legislature for the authority to bypass union approval and turn the city's lowest-performing schools into (in-district) Horace Mann charter schools.[16] However, he did not advocate lifting the cap on Commonwealth charter schools. The following year, he told a group of Commonwealth charter operators and top BPS officials that he wanted them to begin working together, laying the groundwork for the city's approval as a Gates compact site in 2011.

The impact of the statewide cap

Since the passage of Massachusetts's first charter school law in 1994, the cap on the number of charters that can operate in the state[17] has been increased four times. Yet after each increase, the number of charter schools has quickly reached the legal limit.[18] The cap plays the role of a protectionist restriction on "trade," softening the impact that a successful sector of charter "imports" would have had if allowed free rein. Massachusetts also protects districts from the financial impact of charters by partially reimbursing their loss of funds when students choose charter schools.

According to our interviewees, this protectionism has a multifaceted impact on district-charter engagement. For example, because the cap protects the district's market share, engagement is less of a zero-sum affair than it would be otherwise. This opens the door to limited forms of engagement. At the same time, because the cap reduces the competitive pressure from charters, it discourages the district from engaging them in the most demanding and potentially transformative ways, such as by adopting a portfolio approach to managing its schools. If protectionism continues, engagement might well remain stuck where it is. Yet change could happen. According to one interviewee, the possibility that the cap will be raised (or eliminated) could be encouraging the district to engage preemptively and establish a position of strength for future negotiations.

Pilot and innovation schools

As noted, BPS oversees several types of autonomous schools, including pilot schools, innovation schools, and Horace Mann charters; yet (somewhat ironically) the existence of these schools may discourage rather than encourage engagement with completely independent Commonwealth charters. Some observers believe that BPS favors these other options in part because they allow it to claim the mantle of school choice without further empowering the city's fully autonomous charters or incorporating them into its plans for the future.

Other factors supporting engagement

In addition to Mayor Menino's change of heart and the statewide charter cap, other factors appear to have laid a foundation for district-charter engagement. For example, in 2009, the Boston Plan for Excellence (BPE) set a precedent for collaboration when it launched the Boston Schoolchildren's Consortium, a cross-sector initiative intended to bring leaders from district, charter, and parochial schools together to share lessons learned. Similarly, although Boston's charters are hardly monolithic, they are all members of the Boston Charter Alliance (a subcommittee of the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association) and have a history of working together.

Last but certainly not least, according to a recent study from Stanford University's CREDO Institute, Boston's charters are among the best in the country, making it difficult for the district and other stakeholders to overlook them for long.

Table 3. Overview of factors shaping district-charter engagement in Boston

Factor shaping engagement		How the factor shapes engagement
Event(s) that helped trigger district-charter engagement		o In 2009, the Boston Plan for Excellence (BPE) launched the Boston Schoolchildren's Consortium, bringing together leaders from traditional public, charter, parochial, pilot, and independent schools to explore how lessons from successful schools could be shared across sectors.[19] o Mayor Menino had requested that the district and charters begin coordinating to better serve the city's students, so when the opportunity to become a Gates compact site surfaced, the mayor pushed to make it happen.
People*		
District leadership	**Superintendent**	o The mayor effectively appoints the superintendent, who largely executes the mayor's policy.[20]
	Mayor	o Beginning in 2009, Menino took a more friendly position toward charter schools. Yet he repeatedly defended the state cap on Commonwealth charter schools, even while taking steps to engage them via the Gates compact.
Charter leadership	**Charter operators**	+ All sixteen charter operators in Boston are members of the Boston Alliance for Charter Schools, providing a single structure through which the district can communicate with all of the city's charters. – Boston charters have not played a prominent role in politics and advocacy work.[21]
	Charter authorizers	o The state authorizes all Commonwealth charter schools.
Outside influencers	**Philanthropy and advocacy**	+ To date, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has awarded the Boston Compact $3.35 million in support of the compact work. + Three local foundations—the Barr Foundation, the Boston Foundation, and Strategic Grant Partners—and the Boston Opportunity Agenda CEOs have all provided critical financial support for the compact work. + The Boston Foundation has commissioned a number of reports highlighting both the effectiveness of and demand for Boston charter schools.[22] o Advocacy organizations have not played a significant role shaping district-charter engagement in Boston. Rather, most advocacy issues (e.g., efforts to raise the charter cap) have taken place at the state level.
	Politicians	– A number of legislators have strongly opposed the expansion of Commonwealth charters in Boston.
Conditions that…		
Provide a stake in charter success	**Accountability**	– There is no mechanism in place whereby BPS can count the performance of Commonwealth charter schools (those that the state authorizes) in its state accountability score.
	Charter authorizing	– The district cannot authorize Commonwealth charter schools and has no say in whether they open or how they operate.
Create competitive pressures	**Charter quality**	+ As a sector, Boston's charter schools perform better than those in any other urban district. According to CREDO's latest analysis, 81 percent of Boston charters significantly outperform comparable district schools in reading, while 92 percent do so in math.
	Enrollment trends	o Although charter enrollment has nearly doubled in the last five years and enrollment in BPS has declined slightly, the city has reached a state-imposed cap on charter enrollment.

+ Factor supporting engagement | – Factor suppressing engagement | o Factor neither supporting nor suppressing engagement

*A long list of potential stakeholders drive whether and how districts engage charters, including unions, parents, and the business community. Across our sites, however, three in particular stood out: philanthropic organizations, advocacy organizations, and politicians. We therefore focus on these groups.

The path forward

So far, district-charter engagement in Boston has produced friendlier and more regular communication between the sectors, as well as modest gains in operational efficiency. However, the path to achieving the more ambitious goals outlined in the compact is challenging.

According to CRPE's interim report on the Gates compact work, BPS and Commonwealth charters are still just "getting to know each other."[23] Yet some charter leaders have already expressed frustration with the pace of change and suggest that they are giving more than they are receiving. For example, they note that all charter operators that were asked to adjust their schedules to save the district money on transportation did so; the district has made just three buildings available to Commonwealth charters, even though excess capacity is estimated to be around eighteen thousand seats.[24]

Growing pressure to overturn protectionist policies may also complicate the district-charter relationship going forward. A new lawsuit challenging the charter school cap hinges on the notion that students forced to attend BPS schools are receiving an inferior education—a claim that seems unlikely to ease tensions (though one interviewee observed that it has yet to affect the sectors' working relationship). While Boston's charters did not bring the suit, they support lifting the cap, and the public debate over "free trade" could pit the two sectors against one another to the detriment of the compact.

Fortunately, other signs are more encouraging. In particular, the recent election of Mayor Martin Walsh, a co-founder of one of the city's charter schools who has repeatedly expressed support for raising the statewide cap, has the potential to transform the relationship between the district and charters. Walsh's superintendent, Tommy Chang, is a former charter principal. His chief of education, Rahn Dorsey, is a member of the Gates compact leadership team whom the mayor has charged with building a cross-sector portfolio of high-performing schools in the city. With this brand of leadership, the next chapter of district-charter relations in Beantown has the potential to be very different from the last.

Endnotes

1. Throughout this report, Boston "charters" refers to autonomous Commonwealth charters unless otherwise specified.
2. Charter school statistics include both Commonwealth and Horace Mann charter schools.
3. Boston's Catholic schools are also part of the compact.
4. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, "Gates Foundation Invests Nearly $25 Million in Seven Cities Dedicated to Bold Collaboration between Public Charter and Traditional Schools," press release, http://www.gatesfoundation.org/media-center/press-releases/2012/12/gates-foundation-invests-nearly-25-million-in-seven-cities.
5. To date, Boston has received $3.35 million from the Gates Foundation in support of the compact work.
6. Boston Schools Hub, www.bostonschoolshub.org.
7. Ibid.
8. Boston Compact, "School Partnerships," http://www.bostoncompact.org/school-partnerships/.
9. Boston Compact, "Teaching and Learning," http://www.bostoncompact.org/teaching-and-learning/.
10. Ibid. The Steering Committee is led by twelve educators, including four representatives from BPS, the charter sector, and Catholic schools.
11. S. Yatsko et al., "District Charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report" (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2013), http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/compact_interim_report_6_2013_0.pdf.
12. The Boston Compact is available at http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/Boston_Compact_Dec11_0.pdf.
13. Ibid.
14. Boston Compact, "Cross-Sector Operations," http://www.bostoncompact.org/cross-sector-operations/.
15. M. Levenson, "Menino Boosts Charter Schools," *Boston Globe*, June 10, 2009, http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2009/06/10/menino_promotes_charter_schools_in_sudden_shift/.
16. Ibid.
17. State law specifies the number of Commonwealth charter schools that are allowed statewide and, via spending limits, the number of students who can be enrolled in charter schools in any given district. In 2010, the law was amended to double the number of charter students permitted in the state's lowest-performing districts from about 9 percent to 18 percent of public school students. Since then, seven "proven" school operators have been granted charters to expand their operations in Boston. As of early 2013, virtually all of the new seats authorized for Boston under the 2010 amendment have been approved by BESE, leaving no room for additional growth in city charters. J. A. Peyser, "Boston and the Charter School Cap," *Education Next* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2014), http://educationnext.org/boston-and-the-charter-school-cap/.
18. The charter cap was originally set at twenty-five in 1994. In 1997, the cap increased to fifty, but thirteen of the additional twenty-five charters had to be Horace Mann charters. In 2000, the cap was raised from fifty to 120, allowing for seventy-two Commonwealth and forty-eight Horace Mann charter schools. In 2010, the state increased the cap to allow up to 18 percent of students in the state's lowest-performing districts—including Boston—to attend charters.
19. Boston Plan for Excellence, "Boston's Charter, Parochial, Pilot, Private, Public Schools and METCO Form a New Consortium," press release, December 1, 2009, http://www.bpe.org/taxonomy/term/207.
20. The mayor does not directly appoint the superintendent, but he appoints the committee that selects the superintendent.
21. These charters are more interested in embedding in the communities in which they are located than in expanding to new communities.
22. For example, see "Informing the Debate: Comparing Boston's Charter, Pilot, and Traditional Schools" (Boston, MA: The Boston Foundation, January 2009), http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/cohodes/files/informingthedebate_final.pdf; "Charter School Demand and Effectiveness: A Boston Update" (Boston, MA: The Boston Foundation, October 2013), http://seii.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Charter-School-Demand-and-Effectiveness.pdf.
23. S. Yatsko et al., "District Charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report."
24. J. A. Peyser, "Boston and the Charter School Cap."

CLEVELAND: CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC EXCHANGE

Overview

In 2012, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) was in danger of being taken over by the state as a result of its poor performance. In response, Mayor Frank Jackson, who appoints the board of education, joined forces with members of the business, philanthropic, and education communities to develop a plan to transform the city's schools.[1] This became known as the Cleveland Plan.

The plan called for a broad set of changes in district governance and operations. In addition, it included a proposal for a sort of cultural and economic exchange between Cleveland's charters and the district by reining in low-performing charters, offering incentives to prompt high-performing charters to align and share practices with the district, and sharing local tax dollars with partner charters. The Ohio Legislature supported a version of the plan (House Bill 525) but dropped the first provision relative to charter accountability. Furthermore, Cleveland citizens voted to fund the plan with a new property-tax levy (Issue 107).

Two years into its implementation, however, the cultural and economic exchange is only beginning to yield results. The district partners with *some* charters to exchange instructional practices, as well as including their results in its accountability score and sharing with them a small portion of levy proceeds. Yet to date, the "exchange" has not transformed the district per the spirit of the Cleveland Plan.

Table 1. Cleveland snapshot

2014–15 facts and figures	
Charter market share	32%
Number of charter schools	55
Charter enrollment	18,557
District enrollment	39,083
Number of authorizers	10
District is an authorizer	Yes (8)*
District governance	Mayoral control
Gates compact site	Yes
CRPE Portfolio Network	Yes
**Number of charter schools authorized by the district shown in ( ).*	

Enrollment trends		
Year	Cleveland Metropolitan School District	Cleveland Charters
10–11	45,060	14,195
11–12	42,883	15,580
12–13	40,072	17,239
13–14	38,775	18,318
14–15	39,083	18,557
5-Yr Change	-5,977	+4,362
Percent Change	-13.3%	+30.7%

Source: Ohio Department of Education.

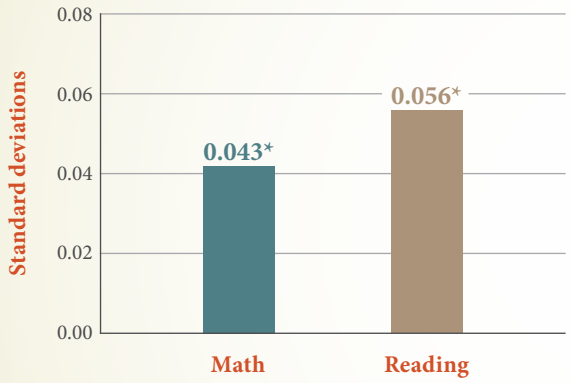
Note: Charter figures include only students who would have otherwise attended CMSD.

continued...

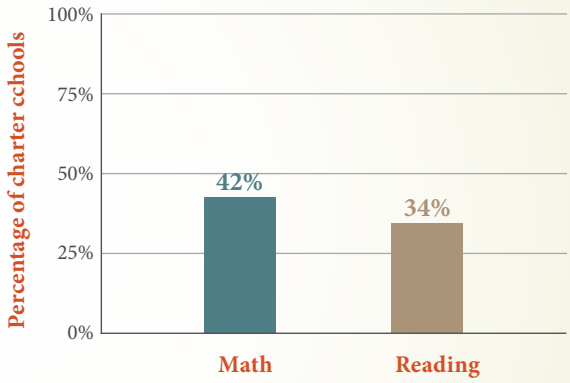
Table 1. Cleveland snapshot (continued)

Charter schools v. traditional public schools 2006–07 through 2011–12

Additional average growth from attending a Cleveland charter (marginal charter effect)



Average percentage of Cleveland charters significantly outperforming district schools

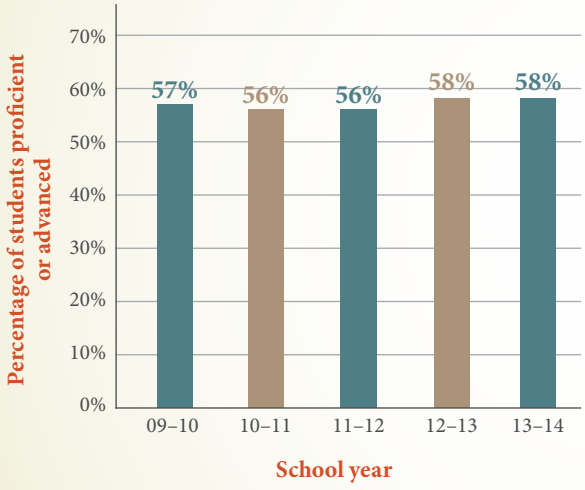


* In CREDO's national sample, these levels of growth would equate to about thirty and forty days of additional learning per year in math and reading, respectively. CREDO cautions that these national calculations may not apply precisely to data on one city, so we offer them only as a point of reference.

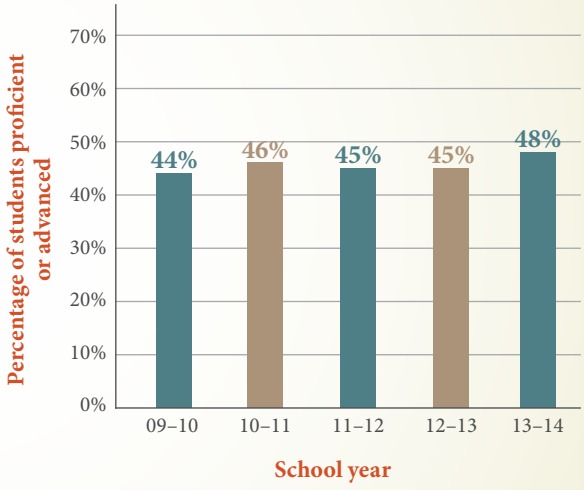
Source: "Urban Charter School Study: Report on 41 Regions," graphs created from CREDO, 2014, retrieved June 24, 2015 from http://urbancharters.stanford.edu/summary.php.

Change in CMSD performance, 2009–10 to 2013–14

ELA



Math



Source: Ohio Department of Education, retrieved June 30, 2015 from http://bireports.education.ohio.gov/PublicDW/asp/Main.aspx?server=edumstrisp02&project=ReportCard&evt=3002&uid=guestILRC&pwd=&persist-mode=%228%22. Includes grades 3–10.

How CMSD is engaging charter schools

Most of the current district-charter engagement efforts in Cleveland are part of the Cleveland Plan,[2] which includes several provisions intended to incentivize high-performing charters to partner with the district (see *Key charter-related components of the Cleveland Plan*).

As Table 2 shows, CMSD has fully implemented only one of the engagement activities identified in this report. It has established official channels for communicating via the Cleveland Transformation Alliance (a public-private partnership that oversees fidelity to the Cleveland Plan), as well as participating as a Gates compact site. However, it stands out for the steps it has taken to grow the supply of high-quality schools (regardless of operator) in the city since the Cleveland Plan was adopted in 2012. As articulated in the plan, the district endorses high-performing charters and offers them a share of its levy dollars in exchange for the right to include their performance in its state accountability score. For the 2014–15 school year, fifteen partner schools received approximately $4 million, parceled out in proportion to charter schools' enrollment.[3]

CMSD is also engaging with charters in other ways. For example, CMSD schools and the seventeen charters with which it partners in the 2015–16 school year (eight of which it also authorizes) participate in the Cleveland Quality School Network, where they share best practices and collaborate on shared challenges. (CMSD has also opened its professional development to those charters.) Several charters that are part of the Breakthrough Charter Schools network have also bought or leased school buildings from the district.[4]

Key charter-related components of the Cleveland Plan

1. The district can ***share one mill in local property taxes*** with charters that "partner" with it.[5] A "mill" is a tax rate equal to one-thousandth of assessed property value.) This one mill is drawn from the fifteen mills approved by citywide referendum in November 2012, which was expected to generate $85 million in revenue annually.
2. Partnering charters enter into an agreement that requires, among other things, participation in Quality Schools Network activities, including teacher and leader convenings, to share practices and showcase excellence.[6]
3. CMSD can ***count the enrollment and performance scores*** of partner charters in its state accountability score.
4. Created the Cleveland Transformation Alliance (CTA), a public-private partnership that oversees fidelity to the Cleveland Plan.

In 2014, Cleveland became a Gates compact site. Although it is still in the planning stage, CMSD's participation has led it to engage with a larger, more representative group of charter operators in the city. Compact participants plan to develop and finalize a compact by the end of 2015.

Table 2. Engagement activities in Cleveland

Goal	Activity	Example
IC	1. The district and charters establish official channels for communicating (e.g., working groups, steering committees, appointed representatives for different stakeholder groups).	• Both district and charter leaders participate in the Transformation Alliance, the public-private partnership set up to oversee faithful implementation of the Cleveland Plan. • In 2014, Cleveland became a Gates compact site. Though it is still in the planning stage, CMSD is currently working with charter operators to develop a compact.
IP	2. The district and charters establish structured opportunities for school-level employees to share best practices and problem-solve around shared challenges (e.g., common professional development; working committees to discuss how best to implement Common Core or address ELL student needs).	• As of the 2015–16 school year, CMSD formally partners with seventeen charter schools, all of which participate in the Cleveland Quality Schools Network, where district and charter schools share best practices and collaborate. • CMSD has opened its professional development to partner charters.
OE	3. The district and charters work together to lower the cost of providing key services (e.g., transportation, purchasing, special education, and facilities utilization and maintenance).	No concrete action taken to date.
EA	4. The district and charters report the same data metrics such that comparable, transparent and timely information relative to student demographics and school performance is available publicly.	The Cleveland Transformation Alliance maintains a website that includes for all participating charter and district schools: • School performance data • Information on school programs, transportation, enrollment procedures, etc. (as reported by schools) • Community ratings for each school[7]
EA	5. The district and charters participate in a common and coordinated enrollment system.	No, although a "fair and informative citywide enrollment process" is a goal of the Cleveland Plan.[8]
EA	6. The district and charters coordinate to ensure that all students have access to high-quality school options regardless of their location or educational needs (e.g., strategically siting new schools, providing students free and convenient transportation to any public school).	• A primary goal of the Cleveland Plan is to ensure that all Cleveland students have access to high-quality schools. • "Exploring how charters can address the needs of the lowest-performing district schools" is a focus of Cleveland's Gates compact work.[9] • A report by nonprofit IFF, formerly the Illinois Facilities Fund, identifies Cleveland neighborhoods where children need better access to high-performing schools.[10]

continued...

Table 2. Engagement activities in Cleveland (continued)

Goal	Activity	Example
QS	7. The district shares resources with charters, including local levy dollars and/or facilities, to make it easier for them to operate.	• Charter schools that CMSD authorizes, or that enter a formal "partnership" with CMSD, are eligible to share in one mill of the fifteen mill property tax levy CMSD passed in 2012. • Several charter schools that are part of the Breakthrough Charter Schools network have bought or leased district buildings.
QS	8. The district actively works to grow the supply of high-quality charter schools in the city (e.g., recruiting new high-performing schools, advocating for the state to lift charter caps, asking city and local officials to take specific actions).	• One of the main goals of the Cleveland Plan is to "grow the number of high-performing district and charter schools in Cleveland and close and replace failing schools."[11] • CMSD has invited Cleveland charters to "partner" with it. As part of that partnership, CMSD publicly endorses these charters (by recognizing them in the Quality Schools Network).

Goal of engagement
IC – Improve communication
IP – Improve practice
OE – Improve operational efficiencies
EA – Improve equitable access of existing schools for families
QS – Increase supply of high-quality schools across the city

Extent of engagement
Fully implemented | Partially implemented | Not implemented

The factors shaping district-charter engagement

A number of factors inspired Cleveland's "cultural and economic exchange," including the desire of city and district officials to avoid state takeover, the leadership of Mayor Frank Jackson, the influence and support of key stakeholders, and a charter landscape that included both very high-performing and very low-performing schools.

Cleveland's last chance to save its schools

Things did not look good for CMSD in 2011. At the time, the district faced a deficit of $65 million for the 2012–13 school year and was one F rating away from a potential state takeover, which newly elected Republican Governor John Kasich was eager to initiate. To avoid bankruptcy, the district needed more funds. However, with one-third of the city's kids enrolled in charters, the odds of raising more revenue without the support of charter parents were slim. That meant that some portion of any new revenue would need to go to charters.

Faced with a limited set of options, Mayor Jackson (who effectively controlled the district) began developing and selling to his constituents a plan to transform the city's schools, which included a role for charters. As one interviewee explained, "The Cleveland Plan was the last best chance to change Cleveland, and Mayor Jackson was the lead champion out front on all of it."

Outside stakeholders shape Cleveland Plan

A number of individuals outside the mayor's office helped shape the Cleveland Plan. For example, a business leader who was close to the mayor pushed for the plan to support excellent charter schools. Also, representatives from two influential local foundations that had long been involved in Cleveland's school reform efforts shared their expertise, created opportunities for the mayor and others to learn from other cities, and helped frame the legislative debate around House Bill 525.[12]

Once the plan was complete, a number of state politicians proved key to its legislative success. For example, after the plan stalled in the legislature, Governor Kasich offered his public support to the mayor, appearing at press conferences with him and even asking members of his church to pray for all involved to "find the courage to support Mayor Frank Jackson."[13] Several state lawmakers from both parties also supported the plan, even as it (and they) were criticized. As the *Plain Dealer* editorial board wrote, "Jackson had plenty of odd bedfellows.… Legislative supporters on both sides of the aisle braved brickbats from charter school operators and unions."[14]

Limits to engagement

Among the numerous factors limiting district-charter engagement in Cleveland, two stand out: First, the uneven quality of Cleveland's charter schools diminishes the district's incentive to engage equally with all of them. Second, the prospect of "economic exchange" has not been enticing enough for some charters to overcome their deep-rooted distrust of the district. Of the seventeen schools that partner with CMSD, ten are part of the Breakthrough Charter Network, with which CMSD already had a strong relationship prior to the Cleveland Plan. According to some interviewees, this close relationship is intimidating to smaller, less established charter schools.

Table 3 summarizes the leading factors shaping district-charter engagement in Cleveland.

Table 3. Overview of factors shaping district-charter engagement in Cleveland

Factor shaping engagement		How the factor shapes engagement
Event(s) that helped trigger district-charter engagement		The district faced the threat of state takeover as well as a grave financial crisis, prompting Mayor Frank Jackson to propose a new plan to transform the city's schools. That plan included fostering the growth of—and partnering with—high-performing charters.
People*		
District leadership	**Superintendent**	o The mayor appoints the district CEO and nine-member school board.
	Mayor	+ Mayor Frank Jackson developed and promoted the Cleveland Plan.
Charter leadership	**Charter operators**	+ Breakthrough Charter Schools, one of the city's largest and highest-performing charter networks, has been willing to engage with the district. + Charter supporters see CMSD's hiring of a former charter advocate as the district's executive director of charter school partnerships as a positive sign. – There is tremendous diversity across the charter sector, which includes nonprofits and for-profits, large networks, and independent schools, and statewide "virtual" charters. – Many charter operators do not trust the district and view the Cleveland Plan as the district's attempt to gain more control over the charter sector.
	Charter authorizers	– Ohio is considered by many to be the "Wild West" of authorizing because of its large number of authorizers and the lax rules governing them. – With ten charter authorizers sponsoring charter schools within the borders of Cleveland, none represents the entire sector.

continued...

Table 3. Overview of factors shaping district-charter engagement in Cleveland (continued)

People*		
Outside influencers	Philanthropy and advocacy	+ The Cleveland Foundation and the George Gund Foundation have invested heavily in K–12 education in Cleveland and played a critical role developing and promoting the Cleveland Plan. + The business community was involved in the development of the Cleveland Plan and continues to participate in the Transformation Alliance. + The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation awarded Cleveland a $100,000 compact planning grant in 2014. o Concerned about the impact on charter autonomy, charter advocates opposed giving the Transformation Alliance exclusive chartering authority.
	Politicians	+ Republican Governor John Kasich led a bipartisan coalition to pass legislation that enabled CMSD to implement the Cleveland Plan. + A number of state lawmakers from both political parties defended the Cleveland Plan as it was debated in the legislature.
Conditions that…		
Provide a stake in charter success	Accountability	+ CMSD's state accountability rating includes the charter schools that it authorizes and those with which it formally partners.[15]
	Charter authorizing	+ CMSD is a charter authorizer.
Create competitive pressures	Charter quality	+ There are a number of very high-performing charter schools and charter school networks in Cleveland. – Some of the city's lowest-performing schools are also charters.
	Enrollment trends	– District enrollment has fallen by nearly six thousand (13 percent) over the last five years, while charter enrollment has risen by 4,362 (31 percent).
+ Factor supporting engagement | – Factor suppressing engagement | o Factor neither supporting nor suppressing engagement		

*A long list of potential stakeholders drive whether and how districts engage charters, including unions, parents, and the business community. Across our sites, however, three in particular stood out: philanthropic organizations, advocacy organizations, and politicians. We therefore focus on these groups.

The path forward

The changes that have occurred in the past few years have left CMSD well positioned to pursue a "portfolio" model focused on school quality, and pending state legislation could also encourage a quality-oriented partnership by increasing the level of accountability for charters and their authorizers.[16] Although it is just one of many authorizers in Cleveland, the district still has considerable influence over the charter sector because of what it has to offer. It cannot control charter quality, but it can support excellent schools.

By adopting the Cleveland Plan, the city of Cleveland formally embraced charters as partners in public education. Moreover, it adopted a strategy that few other cities have been willing to consider: sharing a portion of local property taxes with charters. Still, some interviewees noted that the current relationship between CMSD and its charter partners is largely transactional. Yet they see an opportunity to build on the existing "cultural and economic exchange." The district could further improve its relationship with the charter sector by sitting down with charter leaders, identifying the issues they want or need to work through, and developing a plan for doing so. In theory, this is what the Gates Compacts are all about.

According to Stephanie Klupinski, executive director of charter schools for CMSD, one of the district's goals is to maximize charter participation in the compact. Yet there is an obvious tension between this approach and the Cleveland Plan, which encourages the district to distinguish between high- and low-performing charters. Ultimately, the district may find that it must choose between the goals of the compact or the Cleveland Plan.

Endnotes

1. In 1997, state policy makers passed legislation to transfer responsibility for Cleveland's school district to the mayor's office after years of declining enrollment, abysmal student performance, and financial crises. The mayor appoints the nine voting members of the board of education from a slate of nominees selected by a local nominating panel. The board, with the concurrence of the mayor, appoints the chief executive officer of the school district.

2. F. Jackson, "Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools" (Cleveland, OH: Office of the Mayor, February 2012), http://media.cleveland.com/metro/other/ClevelandPlanFinal.pdf, 8.

3. Cleveland Transformation Alliance, "A Report to the Community on the Implementation and Impact of *Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools*" (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Transformation Alliance, June 2015), http://www.gcpartnership.com/~/media/Files%202015/Every%20Monday%20Jan%20June%202015/Cleveland%20Transfirmation%20Alliance%20Cleveland%20plan%20progress%20A_Book_Final_full%20page%20spread%20(1).ashx.

4. In 2011, Breakthrough purchased four closed school buildings from CMSD for $1.5 million. Also in 2011, the Intergenerational School opened the Near West Intergenerational School (NWIS) in the lower level of CMSD's Garrett Morgan School of Science. When NWIS outgrew the space, CMSD leased them the empty school building next door for $1 per year. A year or two later, they renegotiated the lease. The current lease (negotiated March 2015) is for $35,000 per year. Citizens Academy III, also affiliated with Breakthrough Schools, will open in 2015, leasing an annex at CMSD's Whitney M. Young Leadership Academy for $18,500 per year.

5. Partner charter schools must participate in the Cleveland Quality Schools Network aimed at instructional collaboration, administer the Conditions for Learning student survey, and allow the district to count its enrollment and performance in the district's state accountability score. Charters interested in partnering with the district must submit a twelve-part application aimed at evaluating the school's alignment with the goals of the Cleveland Plan and committing to a number of shared principles. The application is available on CMSD's website at http://clevelandmetroschools.org/cms/lib05/OH01915844/Centricity/Domain/2528/CommunitySchoolPartnershipApplication10.31.14.pdf.

6. Cleveland Transformation Alliance, "A Report to the Community on the Implementation and Impact of *Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools*."

7. In 2015, the Cleveland Transformation Alliance developed its own school rating system, available at http://www.clevelandta.org/.

8. F. Jackson, "Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools."

9. Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD), "CMSD and Charter School Application Orientation," November 7, 2014, http://slidegur.com/doc/195035/this-powerpoint---cleveland-metropolitan-school-district.

10. IFF (formerly the Illinois Facilities Fund), "A Shared Responsibility: Ensuring Quality Education in Every Cleveland Neighborhood" (Chicago, IL: IFF, 2015), http://www.iff.org/resources/content/3/0/documents/IFF%20Cleveland%20Report_FINAL(2).pdf.

11. The Cleveland Plan allowed the district to waive some collective bargaining provisions, share local levy revenues with charters, include district-sponsored charter performance results in the district's report card data, and request exemptions from state education-related statutes. See "Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools," Executive Summary, http://www.clevelandmetroschools.org/cms/lib05/OH01915844/Centricity/Domain/4/ClevelandPlanExecutiveSummary.pdf.

12. House Bill 525 was the enabling legislation for the Cleveland Plan that provided Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) with greater flexibility to run its schools. For additional information about the Cleveland Plan, see J. Poiner, "Progress and Problems: Checking in on the Cleveland Plan" (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, September 2015), http://edexcellence.net/articles/progress-and-problems-checking-in-on-the-cleveland-plan?utm_source=Fordham+Updates&utm_campaign=cafebf24b8-20150920_LateLateBell9_20_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d9e8246adf-cafebf24b8-71539965&mc_cid=cafebf24b8&mc_eid=d42ca9fe69.

13. C. Candinsky, "Kasich Hails Cleveland School Plan" *Columbus Dispatch*, March 13, 2012, http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2012/03/13/cleveland-school-plan-hailed.html.

14. Editorial Board, "The Plan Finally Wins Out," *Plain Dealer*, June 13, 2012, http://www.cleveland.com/opinion/index.ssf/2012/06/the_jackson_plan_finally_wins.html.

15. As part of this partnership, partner schools agree to allow the CMSD to include their enrollment data separately on the district's report card and to have their academic performance data combined with comparable data from the CMSD schools for the district's state report card. Partner schools also agree to administer a Conditions of Learning survey and are part of the Cleveland Quality Schools Network, where district and charter schools network, share best practices, and collaborate. For more, see: CMSD, "CMSD and Charter School Partnership," http://www.clevelandmetroschools.org/Page/6142.

16. During spring 2015, lawmakers circulated a number of proposals to improve transparency, accountability, and oversight in Ohio's charter sector. The bill did not make it to a final vote during the 2014–15 legislative session. See V. Strauss, "Ohio's Effort to Reform its Ridiculed Charter Schools is a Big Fail," *Washington Post*, July 1, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2015/07/01/ohios-effort-to-reform-its-ridiculed-charter-schools-is-a-big-fail/; P. O'Donnell, "Charter School Operators and Authorizers Would Face More Scrutiny and Pressure, under New Bill from Ohio," *Plain Dealer*, April 15, 2015, http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2015/04/charter_school_operators_and_authorizers_would_face_more_scrutiny_and_pressure_under_new_bill_from_ohio_senate.html.

DENVER: TRADING PARTNERS

Overview

When Colorado passed its charter law in 1993, Denver Public Schools (DPS) initially reacted with hostility, claiming it was unconstitutional and using their position as the city's sole authorizer to block the growth of charter schools in the Mile High City.[1] Following a 2007 exposé showing that one-quarter of DPS students were attending non-DPS schools, however, the district has increasingly looked to charters as bona fide "trading partners" and has made supporting and growing high-quality charter schools a central tenet of its reform plans. In the years since, DPS has engaged charters more deeply than any of the other cities we studied, due in no small part to a decade of district leadership with a strong belief in the value of a portfolio strategy, a significant number of third-party stakeholders who have encouraged engagement, and an education landscape that gives the district a stake in charter success.

Like any trading partners, the two sectors have conflicts, but they enjoy a strong overall relationship. They engage on a relatively even playing field and "trade" to their mutual benefit: Denver charters have access to some district facilities and local tax revenues, and DPS draws on charter capacity to help provide specialized school-based programs for students with severe disabilities. Other anticipated benefits of trade, however, have been slow to materialize, as student performance gains in Denver have been modest and proficiency rates remain low.

Table 1. Denver snapshot

2014–15 facts and figures	
Charter market share	17%
Number of charter schools	46
Charter enrollment	15,024
District enrollment	73,862
Number of authorizers	1
District is an authorizer	Yes (all)
District governance	Elected board
Gates compact site	Yes
CRPE Portfolio Network	Yes

Enrollment trends		
Year	Denver Public Schools	Denver Charters
10–11	69,847	8,341
11–12	71,013	9,723
12–13	71,449	11,793
13–14	72,304	13,786
14–15	73,862	15,024
5-Yr Change	+4,015	+6,683
Percent Change	+5.7%	+80.1%

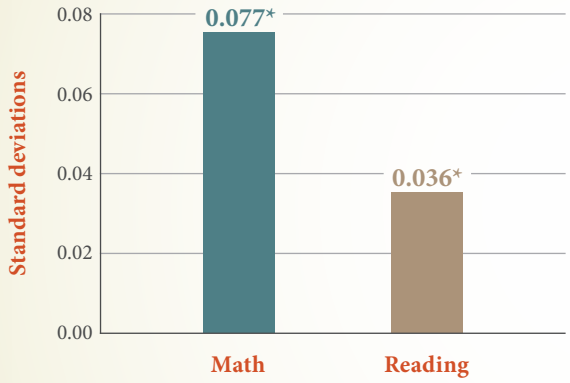
Source: Denver Public Schools. "Current and historical enrollment: 2014-15." Retrieved June 27, 2015 from http://planning.dpsk12.org/enrollment-reports/standard-reports

continued...

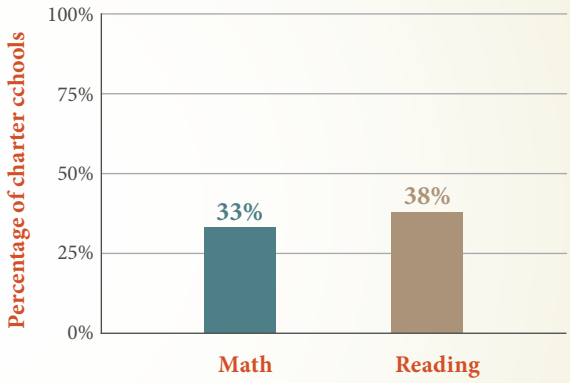
Table 1. Denver snapshot (continued)

Charter schools v. traditional public schools 2006–07 through 2011–12

Additional average growth from attending a Denver charter (marginal charter effect)



Average percentage of Denver charters significantly outperforming district schools

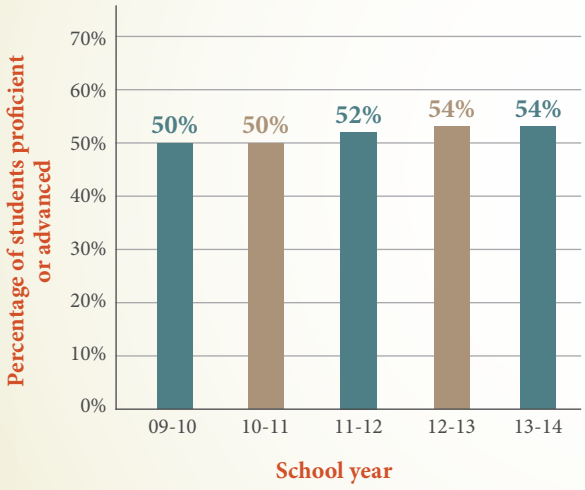


* In CREDO's national sample, these levels of growth would equate to about fifty-six and twenty-five days of additional learning in math and reading, respectively. CREDO cautions that these national calculations may not apply precisely to data on one city, so we offer them only as a point of reference.

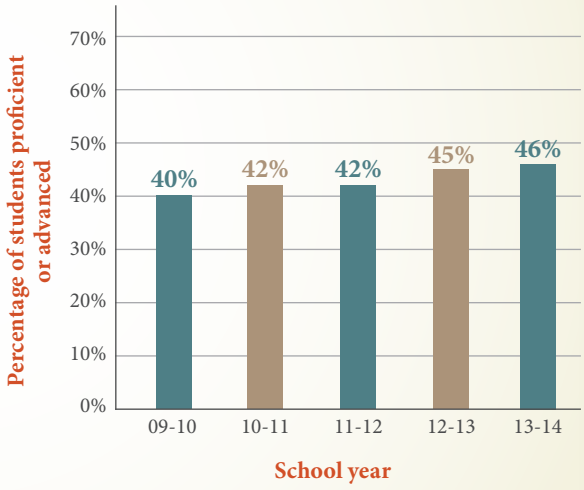
Source: "Urban Charter School Study: Report on 41 Regions," graphs created from CREDO, 2014, retrieved June 24, 2015 from http://urbancharters.stanford.edu/summary.php.

Change in DPS performance, 2009–10 to 2013–14

ELA



Math



Source: Colorado Department of Education, "SchoolView Data Lab Report."

How DPS is engaging charter schools

Many of Denver's engagement efforts began as priorities of two reform-minded DPS superintendents (Michael Bennet and incumbent Tom Boasberg) who saw charters not as a threat, but as potential trading partners. Over time, the two sectors have negotiated favorable terms to provide access to facilities, share local levy proceeds, and serve high-need students.

Early efforts led by Bennet and Boasberg evolved as a result of Denver's participation in the Gates compact initiative, which began in 2010 (see *Key Denver compact agreements*, page 67). Through its compact work, Denver has fully implemented a number of the engagement activities identified in this report. For example, since 2010, DPS has used the same School Performance Framework (SPF) to evaluate and present comparable data on every public school in the city; in 2011, DPS and its charters created the District Charter Collaborative Council, a permanent body charged with improving cooperation between the two sectors. In 2012, DPS rolled out a common enrollment system, SchoolChoice, which now includes every one of the city's public schools, as well as SchoolMatch, a website that allows families to compare schools based on their location and performance, as well as other characteristics.

Denver has implemented further engagement activities with—to date—more limited reach. For example, DPS and its charters offer a number of opportunities for staff from the two sectors to learn from one another and improve their practice (see Table 2). Yet relatively few teachers from either sector have participated. Similarly, Success Express, a shuttle bus for district and charter students operating in Denver's Near Northeast and Far Northeast neighborhoods, has provided students in those areas with greater access to local school choices since its 2011 launch, all while saving the district approximately $670,000 per year in transportation costs. Yet the district has not extended similar transportation to the rest of the city.

In an effort to provide more equitable access, since 2007, DPS has issued an annual call for quality schools, in which it invites school operators (including but not limited to charters) to apply to start new schools in underserved neighborhoods. And in 2014, it partnered with thirteen charters to establish specialized school-based programs for students with severe disabilities.[2]

Finally, DPS has taken several steps to help its charters extend their reach, such as sharing levy dollars and leasing DPS-owned facilities at cost. (Approximately 86 percent of Denver charters are now located in district buildings.) The district has also implemented a streamlined renewal and replication process for high-performing charter operators.

Table 2. Engagement activities in Denver

Goal	Activity	Example
IC	1. The district and charters establish official channels for communicating (e.g., working groups, steering committees, appointed representatives for different stakeholder groups).	• Denver has been a Gates compact site since 2010, which created a formal relationship with all of the city's charter schools that extends beyond authorizing. • In 2011, DPS and the city's charter operators formed the District Charter Collaborative council. Unlike the Gates compact steering committee that preceded it, the council does not include any third-party intermediaries (just district and charter representatives); it is meant to be a permanent body that institutionalizes collaboration. ◦ The Council meets once each month. It is comprised of: - Four elected charter representatives and one appointed charter representative - Four district representatives from the senior leadership team - Five working groups designed to problem-solve around strategic priorities and concerns or issues the council identifies[3]

continued...

Table 2. Engagement activities in Denver (continued)

Goal	Activity	Example
IP	2. The district and charters establish structured opportunities for school-level employees to share best practices and problem-solve around shared challenges (e.g., common professional development; working committees to discuss how best to implement Common Core or address ELL student needs).	A number of programs provide opportunities for school staff from both sectors to learn from one another, though participation has been limited. Examples include: • Peer-to-peer learning labs, which bring teachers from both sectors together to share best practices and brainstorm around shared challenges. In 2014–15, 220 teachers from eleven charters and eleven district schools participated. • The Short Cycle Assessment Network (SCAN), a cohort of two charter and twenty-one district schools charged with creating rigorous formative assessments to use on a six-week cycle, analyzing the results, and using those data to plan next steps.[4] • The Residency for the Educational Development of DPS Intrapreneurs (REDDI), a leadership residency program for aspiring district leaders. Participants conduct their residency in successful charters that have developed their own leadership training curricula and residency models. As of the 2014–15 school year, eleven fellows had enrolled in the program.
OE	3. The district and charters work together to lower the cost of providing key services (e.g., transportation, purchasing, special education, and facilities utilization and maintenance).	In 2011, DPS launched Success Express, a shuttle bus for district and charter school students operating in two Denver neighborhoods.[5] An evaluation of the program found that it saved approximately $670,000 per year compared to traditional transportation costs, while improving attendance.[6] However, the district is not required to provide transportation for charter students and does not offer this service citywide.
EA	4. The district and charters report the same data metrics such that comparable, transparent and timely information relative to student demographics and school performance is available publicly.	• Since 2012, DPS has published information on every public school in Denver on SchoolMatch, which allows families to filter and compare schools based on location, performance, and a variety of other characteristics.[7] • Since 2010, every public school in Denver has been evaluated using the same School Performance Framework.[8]
EA	5. The district and charters participate in a common and coordinated enrollment system.	In 2012, Denver launched SchoolChoice, a single enrollment system for all Denver public schools.[9]
EA	6. The district and charters coordinate to ensure that all students have access to high-quality school options regardless of their location or educational needs (e.g., strategically siting new schools, providing students free and convenient transportation to any public school).	DPS and its charter sector have implemented several programs designed to facilitate equitable access to high-quality schools. • In 2011, DPS launched Success Express (see above). • Since 2007–08, DPS has conducted an annual call for high-quality schools, in which it invites high-performing district and charter operators to apply to open new schools where they are most needed. • In 2014, DPS partnered with thirteen charter schools to operate specialized charter-based programs for students with severe disabilities.[10] • Beginning in 2016, DPS school report cards will include an equity score alongside scores for achievement, growth, and engagement.

continued...

Table 2. Engagement activities in Denver (continued)

Goal	Activity	Example
QS	7. The district shares resources with charters, including local levy dollars and/or facilities, to make it easier for them to operate.	• In 2013, the Denver school board moved to share mill levy dollars with charter schools.[11] As a result, the city's charters received $13,680,886 from these local funds in 2014–15. • Approximately 86 percent of charters are currently located in DPS-owned facilities.
QS	8. The district actively works to grow the supply of high-quality charter schools in the city (e.g., recruiting new high-performing schools, advocating for the state to lift charter caps, asking city and local officials to take specific actions).	• DPS actively recruits new charter operators.[12] • DPS has created a differentiated application for high-performing operators seeking to replicate. • DPS policies favor the expansion of larger, well-known charter operators over smaller, more specialized charters.

Goal of engagement
IC – Improve communication
IP – Improve practice
OE – Improve operational efficiencies
EA – Improve equitable access of existing schools for families
QS – Increase supply of high-quality schools across the city

Extent of engagement
Fully implemented | Partially implemented | Not implemented

The factors shaping district-charter engagement

Almost all of the factors we identified as critical to the district-charter relationship have supported engagement in Denver. Most notably, two pro-reform superintendents, buoyed by a supportive school board and backed by political and financial support from education advocacy groups, have maintained the momentum for change for nearly a decade. Additionally, several features of Denver's broader education landscape give the district a stake in charters' success.

District leaders support engagement

In 2007, the *Rocky Mountain News* published an exposé revealing that one-quarter of DPS students were attending non-DPS schools, including private schools and charter schools in surrounding districts. These departures cost the district $125 million in lost revenues each year and left many school buildings half-empty. Moreover, the remaining students were disproportionately poor and non-white.[13]

The exposé provided an opening for then-Superintendent Michael Bennet and the school board to pursue a more aggressive set of reforms focused on improving school quality and offering families greater choice.[14] Following the exposé, Bennet pushed the district toward a new "portfolio" strategy that relied on closing or turning around low-performing schools and opening new, high-performing ones (including charters). After Bennet exited DPS in 2009 to become a U.S. senator, implementing his vision fell to his chief operating officer and successor, Tom Boasberg.

Within months of Boasberg's appointment, the composition of the seven-member school board that had supported Bennet's plans shifted, leaving the superintendent with a one-vote majority that backed his reforms. At the time, many observers viewed the board election as a sign that voters disapproved of the changes that were underway. In 2013, however, the pendulum swung back in Boasberg's direction when new board elections ushered in an overwhelmingly pro-reform and pro-charter majority. Since then, the board has approved every one of the district's proposals, allowing Boasberg to continue engaging Denver's charters.[15]

Outside stakeholders keep the pressure on

A number of organizations outside government have supported district-charter engagement in Denver. The Colorado League of Charter Schools played an important role in initiating dialogue between the two sectors. Local think tanks and philanthropies, such as A+ Denver and the Piton and Donnell-Kay Foundations, have repeatedly highlighted where and how the district has fallen short and created public pressure for bolder action.[16] Denver's recognition as a Gates compact site in 2010 gave engagement efforts an additional boost, as did the $4 million grant that accompanied it. Finally, at various points in the last decade, a handful of other national education groups have opened their wallets during local school board elections to ensure that the city's reform-minded superintendents would retain the support of a pro-reform majority.[17]

Denver's education landscape gives the district a stake in charter success

In addition, several features of Denver's broader education landscape encourage engagement by giving the district a stake in charter success and limiting the threat that charters pose. For example, as the city's sole charter authorizer, DPS retains more control over the growth and quality of charter schools than the other districts we studied do, making it more likely to offer the schools assistance and giving charters themselves an extremely strong incentive to cooperate. Moreover, because charter performance is included in the district's state accountability score, district leaders benefit politically when their charters perform well, instead of being embarrassed when they outperform district-run schools. Finally, because enrollment has been growing across both sectors in recent years, comparatively few district employees have lost their jobs because of charters, making district-charter engagement less of a zero-sum affair.

Key Denver Compact agreements[18]

1. Help the most effective schools reach substantially greater levels of scale; commit to locating new schools in the highest-need areas.
2. Implement a common and coordinated choice enrollment system; charters commit to ensuring that midyear-entry students are provided equitable access to schools across the district.
3. Ensure equity regarding special education.
4. Ensure that all students have access to adequate facilities and equitable resources, including per-pupil revenue and all other district resources.
5. Commit to a market-driven system that allows charters to solicit bids for services.
6. Share timely access to longitudinal data systems and data warehouses; charter schools commit to keeping data accurate and current.
7. Refine and improve the School Performance Framework.
8. Close or restructure the lowest-performing schools.
9. Publish progress reports specifying core actions and specific impact of compact efforts over the first twelve to fifteen months of the effort.
10. Implement a parent engagement strategy that effectively communicates the strengths of approved district-run and charter schools.

Excerpt from S. Yatsko et al., "District Charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report" (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2013), http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/compact_interim_report_6_2013_0.pdf.

Table 3. Overview of factors shaping district-charter engagement in Denver

Factor shaping engagement		How the factor shapes engagement
Event(s) that helped trigger district-charter engagement		+ Superintendent Michael Bennet's appointment as leader of DPS in 2005 brought with it an increased focus on the problems of poorly performing schools, and early in his term, Bennet began to make significant changes to address school quality.[19] + The district's efforts to engage charters accelerated in the aftermath of "Leaving to Learn," an exposé describing how one-quarter of students residing within the DPS boundaries were leaving the district to attend other schools. Following the report, the district reached out to charters to help it grow the supply of high-quality schools in the city.
People*		
District leadership	**Superintendent**	+ Pro-reform superintendents have led the district since 2005.
	School board	+ The majority of school board members since 2007 have been pro-reform. – From 2009 to 2013, the pro-reform members held only a one-vote majority. + Since 2013, the school board has approved all of Boasberg's charter-related reforms. Most votes have been unanimous, with occasional dissent from only one member.
Charter leadership	**Charter operators**	+ The Big Three charter networks (KIPP, STRIVE, and Denver School of Science and Technology) report having a strong working relationship with the district, which has supported their rapid expansion. – Outside the Big Three, many new and/or non-replicating charters expressed concern that they do not feel like they have a voice in engagement efforts and that district resources are less accessible to them.
	Charter authorizers	o DPS is the only charter authorizer in the city but does not play a leadership role for the sector.
Outside influencers	**Philanthropy and advocacy**	+ Several local and national philanthropic organizations have financially supported Denver's reform efforts, including backing pro-reform school board candidates. + In 2010, Denver became a Gates compact site, and in 2012, Gates awarded the city $4 million to implement its compact commitments. + Philanthropic and advocacy organizations are largely aligned in their support of the charter sector and push for the district to more fully embrace it.
	Politicians	o Denver Mayor (now Governor) Hickenlooper supported the board's decision to appoint Michael Bennet superintendent in 2005, although local and state politicians have largely taken a backseat to district leaders.
Conditions that…		
Provide a stake in charter success	**Accountability**	+ Charter performance is counted in DPS's state accountability score.
	Charter authorizing	+ DPS is the sole charter authorizer in Denver, giving the district a stake in charter success.
Create competitive pressures	**Charter quality**	+ Three high-performing charter networks operate in Denver and have been willing to replicate. – Beyond those three networks, however, charter school performance is mixed.
	Enrollment trends	+ Student enrollment has been growing within DPS and across the city's charters for several years.

+ Factor supporting engagement | – Factor suppressing engagement | o Factor neither supporting nor suppressing engagement

*A long list of potential stakeholders drive whether and how districts engage charters, including unions, parents, and the business community. Across our sites, however, three in particular stood out: philanthropic organizations, advocacy organizations, and politicians. We therefore focus on these groups.

The path forward

District-charter engagement in Denver has been deeper and more sustained than in any of the other sites we studied, and the results of this "open trade" appear promising. Families have responded positively to the city's unified enrollment system, Success Express is saving money and boosting attendance, and student performance has improved (albeit modestly).

Still, even with the district and charters coming to the table as good faith trading partners, some engagement efforts have encountered challenges. For example, attempts to learn and implement best practices from the charter sector have often failed to penetrate at the district school level, and one interviewee reported that less than half of the district's instructional coaches had spent time in any of the city's high-performing charter schools. In his words, "The district has quite a ways to go in terms of getting regular rank and file [staff] on board… to understand what charters are and what can be learned from them."

According to local charter leaders, many district policies favor larger CMOs at the expense of smaller operators. In order to be awarded district facilities, for instance, a charter must have a proven track record (disqualifying new schools) and a willingness to open in a priority neighborhood (potentially deterring non-replicating charters). In addition, stand-alone charters have largely been absent from the negotiating table because they lack the capacity to participate on a consistent basis.

Since 2009–10, the city's three highest-performing charter operators (all CMOs) have expanded their share of the charter market from 19 percent to 44 percent.[20] Outside this trio, however, only one other charter earned the city's highest performance rating.[21] Consequently, it seems unlikely that the district will change its replication strategy.

Finally, in the course of its engagement efforts, the district has sometimes put pressure on charters to compromise in ways that may interfere with their autonomy and, potentially, their performance. For example, access to funding and facilities can be contingent on hosting a center-based special education program, and charters are sometimes required to purchase certain district services, such as the DPS student information system, performance framework, transportation, and food services. Whether these requirements help or hinder charters is an open question.

Despite its many positive elements, the Denver partnership illustrates how difficult it is to convert engagement efforts into tangible results. Even with district leaders committed to working across sectors, third-party stakeholders pushing for more cooperation, and favorable conditions related to authorizing, accountability, and enrollment, the results of district-charter engagement have been modest, particularly for students.

Still, Denver represents the country's most comprehensive attempt to improve school quality by engaging charters as equal partners through a portfolio approach. If the district stays the course, continuing to replace failing schools with high-quality offerings (including charters), it could become the first in the country to achieve through a district-led effort the kind of transformation that New Orleans witnessed as a consequence of state-mandated action following a massive hurricane.[22]

Endnotes

1. However, charter applicants can appeal to the state if they think DPS makes an unfair call.
2. R. Lake, "The Key is Innovation, not Regulation," *Education Next* 14, no. 4 (Fall 2014), http://educationnext.org/key-innovation-regulation/.
3. Special education, alternative education, finance, serving ELLs, and Office of School Reform and Innovation (OSRI) advisory.
4. Denver Public Schools, "Scan Overview and Selection Process for 2014–15," https://docs.google.com/a/dpsk12.net/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZHBzazEyLm5ldHxkYXRh LWN1bHR1cmUtcGR8Z3g6MjUwZmRjYmNmNmE1MDY0MA.
5. DPS launched Success Express in 2011. Within the two Denver neighborhoods it serves, buses drop off students at several schools along a single route and run the route multiple times over a three- to four-hour period each morning and afternoon, similar to a city bus route. For more, see T. Ely and P. Teske, "Success Express: Transportation Innovation in Denver Charter Schools" (Denver, CO: Center for Education Policy Analysis, February 2014), http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/MHC_Success_Express_2014.pdf, 10–11.
6. Ibid.
7. Denver Public Schools, "SchoolMatch," http://schoolmatch.dpsk12.org/.
8. Since 2010, DPS has evaluated public schools operating in Denver using the School Performance Framework (SPF). (Note that alternative education campuses have a different SPF.) The SPF assigns each school a score on a scale of 0–100 percent and sorts schools into one of five ratings. To determine those scores, the SPF considers academic growth, academic proficiency, student engagement, enrollment rates, and parent satisfaction. In addition, the SPF includes measures for college and career readiness for high schools. By using the same framework for both district-run and charter schools, the school community can easily compare performance across schools to inform decisions related to enrollment, school closure, and where to place new schools. For more, see Denver Public Schools' "School Performance Framework," http://spf.dpsk12.org/default.html.
9. SchoolChoice launched in 2012 and allows families to apply to any public school in Denver, including both district-run and charter schools, using a single process and timeline. In contrast, families previously had to navigate over sixty enrollment processes. It is just one of a handful of such unified enrollment processes nationwide. A+ Denver also plays a key role by providing families important information, forms and dates, and monitoring and reporting on the process. In the program's first year, between 60 and 80 percent of students transitioning to a new school participated in SchoolChoice. Over two-thirds of students using SchoolChoice received their first choice, and 83 percent of students received one of their top three school choices. See M. Klute, "Evaluation of Denver's SchoolChoice Process for the 2011–12 School Year" (Denver, CO: Buechner Institute for Governance, School of Public Affairs, University of Colorado, June 2012), http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/Denver_A%2BDenverSchoolChoiceEvaluation_Jun2012.pdf.
10. R. Lake, "The Key is Innovation, not Regulation."
11. Today, local mill levy dollars that are not targeted for specific programs are distributed to all public schools in the district, including both traditional and charter, on a per-pupil basis. In addition, charters can receive mill levy dollars intended for specific programs (e.g., improving high school graduation rates) so long as they meet the criteria and follow spending guidelines. For more, see "Compact Newsletter" (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, August 2013), http://www.crpe.org/updates/compact-newsletter-august-2013; Denver Public Schools, "Mill Levy Budgeting Update," January 28, 2013, http://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/94B2HS024D84/$file/MillLevyAllocation_BoE_012813_FINAL.pdf.
12. S. Yatsko et al., "District Charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report" (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2013), http://www.crpe.org/publications/district-charter-collaboration-compact-interim-report.
13. B. Hubbard and N. Mitchell, "Leaving to Learn," news series, *Rocky Mountain News*, April 16–24, 2007, http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/sites/default/files/publications/leaving_to_learn_rmn_series.pdf.
14. Since 2008–09, fifty-nine new schools have opened in Denver, including sixteen innovation schools and twenty-eight charter schools. Most have a special focus or target a particular student group. See: Call for New Quality Schools (2013, December 16), c.ymcdn.com. Retrieved October 6, 2014, from http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.coloradoleague.org/resource/collection/A7555732-FCA5-4059-9FD9-FC3FACE1B34B/DPSCall-for-New-Quality-Schools-2014.pdf.

15. J. Zubrzycki, "Denver Elections Could Lead to Unified School Board During Time of Change," *Chalkbeat Colorado*, July 17, 2015, http://co.chalkbeat.org/2015/07/09/denver-elections-could-lead-to-unified-school-board-during-time-of-change/#.VaZn2_lVikq.
16. For example, "Leaving to Learn" news series; A. Ooms, "Beyond Averages: School Quality in Denver Public Schools" (Denver, CO: Donnell-Kay Foundation, 2014), http://dkfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Beyond%20Averages-School%20Quality%20in%20DPS-FINAL.pdf.
17. Bloomberg contributed to Great Schools Denver, a committee that supported Denver Public Schools board candidates who aligned with Superintendent Tom Boasberg's reform efforts. See Z. Torres and K. Crummy, "Bloomberg, Jeb Bush among Donors to Denver, Douglas School Races," *Denver Post*, November 2, 2013, http://www.denverpost.com/breakingnews/ci_24441239/jeb-bush-donates-4-douglas-county-school-board.
18. S. Yatsko et al., "District Charter Collaboration Compact." The actual compact can be found at http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/Boston_Compact_Dec11_0.pdf.
19. K. Boo, "Expectations: Can the Students who Became a Symbol of Failed Reform be Rescued?" *New Yorker*, January 7, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/01/15/expectations.
20. Denver Public Schools, "Current and Historical Enrollment: 2014–15," http://planning.dpsk12.org/enrollment-reports/standard-reports.
21. Highline Academy, http://www.highlineacademy.org.
22. Louisiana created the Recovery School District (RSD) to take over failing schools. In New Orleans, RSD recruited high-quality charters to run those schools, over time eliminating the district's role in day-to-day school operations and focusing instead on holding schools accountable for performance.

WASHINGTON, D.C.: SUPERPOWER SUMMIT

Overview

Forty-four percent of public school students in the District of Columbia attended charter schools in 2014–15, making it the country's third-largest charter sector after New Orleans and Detroit.[1] With charters enrolling so many students, the sector is nearly an even match for the district. In contrast to the other cities examined in this study—places where the charter sector looks more like an emerging economy engaging with a large industrialized nation—the District is a case of two superpowers that are more or less compelled to engage. Both have incentives to negotiate regarding logistical issues, although neither has any intention of ceding territory to the other.

To date, the superpower summit in the nation's capital has resulted in a unified enrollment system that simplifies life for District families, as well as annual reports that provide them with more and better information about the city's schools. However, philosophical differences about the role each sector should play have stymied other engagement efforts. Leaders from the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and the District of Columbia Public Charter Schools Board (DC PCSB), the city's sole authorizer, have both suggested that students benefit from the current mix of charter and traditional schools; yet the terms of this coexistence are a source of disagreement and tension.

Table 1. Washington, D.C. snapshot

2014–15 facts and figures	
Charter market share	44%
Number of charter schools	112
Charter enrollment	37,684
District enrollment	47,548
Number of authorizers	1
District is an authorizer	No
District governance	Mayoral control
Gates compact site	No
CRPE Portfolio Network	Yes

Enrollment trends

Year	District of Columbia Public Schools	Washington, D.C. Charters
10–11	45,630	29,356
11–12	45,191	31,562
12–13	45,557	34,673
13–14	46,393	36,565
14–15	47,548	37,684
5-Yr Change	1,918	8,328
Percent Change	+4.2%	+28.4%

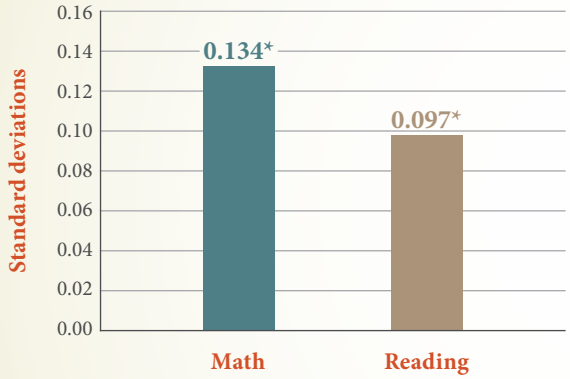
Source: DC PCSB, "Historical Enrollment – Public Schools," retrieved June 30, 2015 from https://data.dcpcsb.org/Enrollment-/Historial-Enrollment-Public-Schools/3db5-ujzr.

continued...

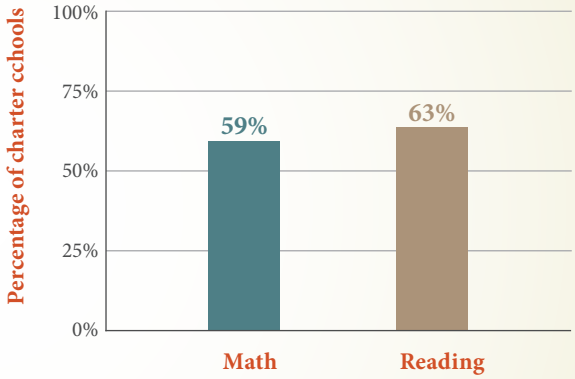
Table 1. Washington, D.C. snapshot (continued)

Charter schools v. traditional public schools 2006–07 through 2011–12

Additional average growth from attending a Washington, D.C. charter (marginal charter effect)



Average percentage of Washington, D.C. charters significantly outperforming district schools

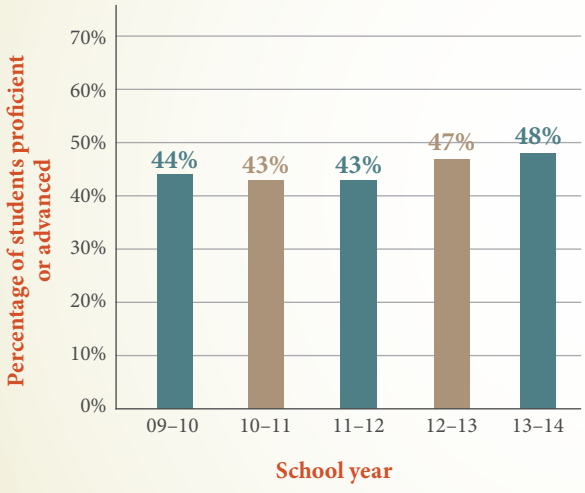


* In CREDO's national sample, these levels of growth would equate to about ninety-six and sixty-nine days of additional learning per year in math and reading, respectively. CREDO cautions that these national calculations may not apply precisely to data on one city, so we offer them only as a point of reference.

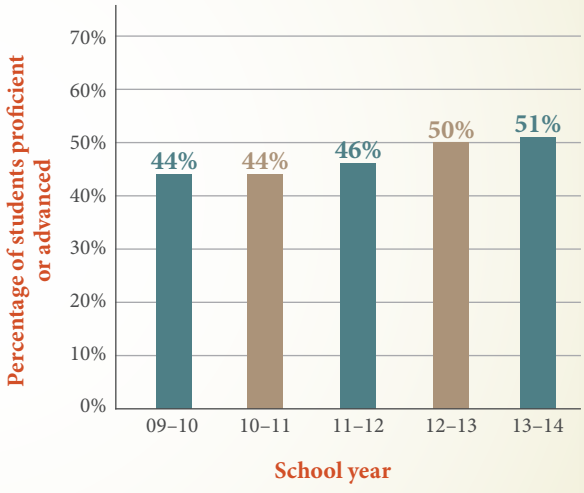
Source: "Urban Charter School Study: Report on 41 Regions," graphs created from CREDO, 2014, retrieved June 24, 2015 from http://urbancharters.stanford.edu/summary.php.

Change in DCPS performance, 2009–10 to 2013–14

ELA



Math



Source: DCPS, "DCPS at a Glance," retrieved June 30, 2015 from http://dcps.dc.gov/node/1013812.

How DCPS is engaging charter schools

The District of Columbia has an unusual system of education governance, which grants the mayor authority over both district and charter schools by giving him or her the power to appoint the chancellor of DCPS and the members of the Public Charter School Board, as well as the deputy mayor for education (DME). The latter oversees the Office of State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), which performs typical state functions for both district and charter schools.

Since the D.C. Board of Education relinquished its charter school authorizing responsibilities in 2006, DCPS and the city's charters have operated independently, like superpowers maintaining their own spheres of influence. However, over the last several years, the two sectors have begun to work together on a number of issues (see Table 2). Most notably, in 2013, they launched a common enrollment system called My School DC. That same year, DCPS and the city's charters also worked with OSSE to publish the first annual "equity report," which presents comparable data on student performance and demographics (as well several other metrics) for every public school in the city. Additionally, school staff from both sectors have participated in a handful of trainings aimed at improving instruction. However, these efforts have involved only a small number of district and charter schools and largely reflect the influence of a single charter leader (Jennifer Niles, now the city's deputy mayor for education).[2]

Engagement has progressed even more slowly in other areas, although several initiatives are underway. For example, the two sectors are working together on two task forces to improve public transportation routes and make the distribution of funds more efficient and equitable. Preparations are also underway for a Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force to be led by the deputy mayor for education.

All of these developments suggest that district-charter engagement in the District may be increasing. However, because past efforts have been hampered by low charter participation, the success of these initiatives is far from assured.

Table 2. Engagement activities in Washington, D.C.

Goal	Activity	Example
IC	1. The district and charters establish official channels for communicating (e.g., working groups, steering committees, appointed representatives for different stakeholder groups).	• The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) has established channels of communication and opportunities for cross-sector coordination. • Three representatives from the charter sector, three from DCPS, and the deputy mayor for education participate in an executive committee that oversees the My School DC common enrollment system. • In 2014, representatives from both sectors participated in the Advisory Committee on Student Assignment that former Mayor Vincent Gray commissioned. However, the DC PCSB representative eventually resigned over a recommendation that all schools (including charters) be required to set aside at least one-quarter of their seats for "at-risk" students, since such a requirement would limit charter autonomy. • The D.C. Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force (launched August 2015) is charged with developing recommendations for the mayor on how to improve coordination across the system to better serve District families.

continued...

Table 2. Engagement activities in Washington, D.C. (continued)

Goal	Activity	Example
IP	2. The district and charters establish structured opportunities for school-level employees to share best practices and problem-solve around shared challenges (e.g., common professional development; working committees to discuss how best to implement Common Core or address ELL student needs).	• In 2009, E. L. Haynes charter school launched the Power of Planning (POP), a one-year project in which it partnered with two DCPS schools to promote school-wide planning focused on boosting student achievement.[3] • In 2011, E. L. Haynes charter school won a three-year, $1.4 million Professional Learning Communities of Effectiveness (PLACES) grant from D.C.'s Race to the Top fund to help teachers citywide transition to the Common Core State Standards (a.k.a the D.C. Common Core Collaborative). The consortium grew to include twenty-two DCPS and charter schools.[4]
OE	3. The district and charters work together to lower the cost of providing key services (e.g., transportation, purchasing, special education, and facilities utilization and maintenance).	No concrete examples of district-charter engagement, but both OSSE and the city have sponsored activities focused on operational efficiency.
EA	4. The district and charters report the same data metrics such that comparable, transparent and timely information relative to student demographics and school performance is available publicly.	Since 2013, DCPS and charter schools have worked together with the philanthropic community, the DME, and OSSE to publish annual "equity reports" that present demographic and performance data and rates for every school, including attendance, absences, suspension, expulsion, student entry, and withdrawal.
EA	5. The district and charters participate in a common and coordinated enrollment system.	DCPS and all but sixteen of Washington, D.C.'s 112 charter operators work with the DME to run a unified enrollment system (My School DC) through which students can enroll at any participating school through a single application process.[5]
EA	6. The district and charters coordinate to ensure that all students have access to high-quality school options regardless of their location or educational needs (e.g., strategically siting new schools, providing students free and convenient transportation to any public school).	• The Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force (launched August 2015) will develop recommendations for the mayor on how to improve coordination across the system to better serve District families. • In 2014, representatives from both sectors participated in the Advisory Committee on Student Assignment that former Mayor Vincent Gray commissioned. However, the DC PCSB representative eventually resigned over a recommendation that all schools (including charters) be required to set aside at least one-quarter of their seats for "at-risk" students, since such a requirement would limit charter autonomy.

continued...

Table 2. Engagement activities in Washington, D.C. (continued)

Goal	Activity	Example
QS	7. The district shares resources with charters, including local levy dollars and/or facilities, to make it easier for them to operate.	• According to the District's charter law, the city's charter schools are supposed to receive "right of first offer" when the city disposes of a former DCPS school building by sale, lease, or transfer. To date, however, charters operate in just forty former DCPS facilities, although fifty-eight were available when the charter law passed in 1996, and dozens more DCPS schools have closed since.[6] • A pending lawsuit brought by the D.C. Association of Public Charter Schools alleges that the city has provided additional funding outside of the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (UPSFF) to DCPS, thereby underfunding the city's charters in violation of the federal School Reform Act of 1995.
QS	8. The district actively works to grow the supply of high-quality charter schools in the city (e.g., recruiting new high-performing schools, advocating for the state to lift charter caps, asking city and local officials to take specific actions).	No concrete examples of district-charter engagement, but both OSSE and the city have sponsored activities focused on quality schools.

Goal of engagement
IC – Improve communication
IP – Improve practice
OE – Improve operational efficiencies
EA – Improve equitable access of existing schools for families
QS – Increase supply of high-quality schools across the city

Extent of engagement
Fully implemented | Partially implemented | Not implemented

The factors shaping district-charter engagement

In Washington, D.C., a large charter sector has pushed district and charter leaders to work together to create a common enrollment system. However, when it comes to ensuring that all students have access to high-quality schools, the two sectors remain philosophically at odds, unable to find a solution that sufficiently safeguards charter autonomies while also addressing the challenges the district faces to provide a seat for any student residing in the city.[7]

A large market share compels cooperation

The number of charter schools in the District expanded at a steady pace in the first years of the new millennium and accelerated noticeably after 2005. However, as the numbers increased, families in the District found it increasingly difficult to navigate the enrollment process, and leaders in both sectors struggled to predict how many students would enroll in their schools.

In 2012, the year before the city launched My School DC, thousands of public school seats turned over in the first weeks of class as part of the annual "wait-list shuffle."[8] During this period, many families retained the right to a seat in one or more schools while waiting for another (more coveted) seat to open up, triggering a citywide "domino effect." Since student counts drive public funding, schools and funding often remained in flux well into the academic year.

According to interviewees, the idea of a common enrollment system had been a topic of discussion among education leaders for some time. But it wasn't until Scott Pearson, a former Obama education official and co-founder of a charter management organization, became executive director of DC PCSB in 2012 that it gained traction. At that point, the NewSchools Venture Fund (NSVF) began working with both sectors to put the pieces in place. Initial steps focused on aligning dates and applications within the charter sector and identifying an individual who could serve as an "honest broker" between the sectors. Consequently, in 2014, My School DC launched under the aegis of the deputy mayor for education.

Around the same time, the city council began requesting that DCPS and DC PCSB report a number of school discipline statistics on an annual basis. However, several charter leaders felt that aggregating these statistics across the sector hid the most important (and useful) part of the story—namely, that some individual schools were excelling. Eventually, OSSE, DC PCSB, DCPS, and the DME worked together to develop the equity reports.

Philosophical differences stymie further progress

While most of the available data suggest that student performance in the District is improving,[9] an independent evaluation of school reform efforts since the advent of mayoral control in 2007 found that (despite some performance gains) poor and minority students were still far less likely than their more advantaged peers to have access to a high-quality teacher, perform at grade level, or graduate from high school in four years.[10]

Leaders from both DCPS and the charter sector acknowledge that equitable access is a problem. However, they disagree about the role that each sector should play in addressing it. Specifically, DCPS wants all charter schools to enroll a minimum percentage of "at-risk" students[11] each year and coordinate with the district on school siting, while the DC PCSB has adamantly opposed such policies, claiming they undermine the autonomies that are central to the charter sector's success. These differences came to a head in 2014, when the DC PCSB representative on the Advisory Committee on Student Assignment resigned over a recommendation that all schools (including charters) be required to set aside at least one-quarter of seats for "at-risk" students, since such a requirement would limit charter autonomy.[12]

Recent organizational changes in the mayor's office could help bridge the gap between the sectors. For example, although the mayor has appointed a deputy mayor for education to oversee all of the city's schools since 2008, it was only in 2015 that Mayor Muriel Bowser changed the reporting structure so the chancellor of DCPS reported directly to a DME tasked with encouraging district-charter collaboration. For the first time, an official with requisite authority presides over the summit.

Other factors fail to encourage engagement

Besides addressing the logistical challenges created by the size of the District's charter sector, there are few reasons for DCPS and the city's charters to "enter into talks." For example, although a number of education advocacy organizations operate in Washington, D.C., most focus on issues specific to either the charter sector (e.g., Friends of Choice in Urban Schools) or to DCPS (e.g., Empower D.C.), rather than the relationship between the two. So there is limited external pressure for them to engage. Moreover, interviewees note that the city's multi-layered bureaucracy makes it difficult for any group to lobby for a change in policy, much less exert the sort of sustained pressure required to make district-charter engagement work. Finally, because DCPS doesn't authorize charters or get "credit" for their performance under the District's accountability system, it has no stake in their success and little reason to view them as anything other than competitors.

Table 3 summarizes the leading factors shaping the district-charter relationship in Washington, D.C.

Table 3. Overview of factors shaping district-charter engagement in Washington, D.C.

Factor shaping engagement		How the factor shapes engagement
Event(s) that helped trigger district-charter engagement		As charter market share grew, the enrollment process became increasingly difficult for families to navigate, which pushed the district and charters to work together to address logistical challenges.
People*		
District leadership	**Chancellor**	+ Chancellor Kaya Henderson has signaled a desire to work more closely with the city's charter schools so that the sectors' efforts complement, rather than duplicate, one another. Under the present mayor, she reports to the deputy mayor for education (DME).
	Mayor	+ The city's mayor appoints the chancellor, the members of the Public Charter School Board, and the DME. The city's previous two mayors (Adrian Fenty and Vincent Gray) asked the DME to coordinate the relationship between DCPS and public charter schools. During those administrations, the chancellor largely determined whether and how to engage charters. + The current mayor, Muriel Bowser, has made it part of her platform to have DCPS and public charters work together to improve outcomes for students; she has also identified it as a top priority for the DME.[13] To that end, Mayor Bowser changed the reporting structure so that the chancellor now reports directly to the DME. o As of this writing, the district has yet to address some of charters' biggest concerns, namely access to district facilities and facility funding. It has also not allayed charters' fears that potential new policies may undermine charter autonomy.
	DME	+ Since 2008, the mayor has appointed a DME to oversee all of the city's schools, though she has no binding authority over the city's charters. In recent years, the individuals filling this role (Abigail Smith and Jennifer Niles) have been considered "honest brokers" with whom both sectors could work. + The current mayor is focused on having the sectors work together as part of her education platform and has requested that the DME form the Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force.
	State superintendent	+ Since 2008, the mayor has appointed the state superintendent of education to lead the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, which functions as the state education agency. The superintendent reports to the DME. OSSE's initiatives have reduced the need for DCPS and charters to engage on certain issues. For example, OSSE provides transportation services for both DCPS and charter students with special needs; it also offers professional development for DCPS and charter school staff relative to special education, discipline, school culture, and data-driven decision making. OSSE has also provided funding for the replication of successful charter schools.
Charter leadership	**Charter operators**	+ To date, most D.C. charters have largely stayed out of politics and advocacy work, although some work with DCPS to provide input to the council, OSSE, DME, PCSB, and other government agencies regarding possible legislation and rulemaking (e.g., about high school graduation requirements).
	Charter authorizers	+ DC PCSB authorizes all of the city's charter schools, providing a natural spokesman/point person for the sector with which the district can work. + DC PCSB has increased its own engagement efforts since Kaya Henderson became chancellor. o DC PCSB's leaders are adamantly opposed to any regulations that will limit the flexibilities they believe are critical to charter success, especially as they relate to student enrollment, school siting, and restrictions on charter growth.

continued...

Table 3. Overview of factors shaping district-charter engagement in Washington, D.C. (continued)

People*		
Outside influencers	Philanthropy and advocacy	+ Several funders, most notably NewSchools Venture Fund and Citybridge, have played an important role funding initial engagement efforts (e.g., My School DC) and working with both sectors to identify trusted third parties and create structures through which the sectors feel comfortable working together. – Although a large number of advocacy organizations operate in Washington, D.C., few have made cross-sector engagement their primary focus. o Funders and other organizations have provided numerous supports that help both sectors (e.g., Achievement Network, Teach For America, New Leaders for New Schools, Leading Educators, etc.), reducing the need for cross-sector engagement.
	Politicians	– Washington, D.C.'s education system has more political layers (and therefore interests) than most, including: Congress, the city council, the state board of education, the mayor, and the DME. As a result, it can be more difficult to push a new policy in the District compared to other cities.
Conditions that…		
Provide a stake in charter success	Accountability	– Under current law, there is no mechanism through which DCPS can benefit from charter success.
	Charter authorizing	– DCPS cannot currently authorize charter schools, although the chancellor has requested the authority to do so in the past and is pursuing other avenues to provide more flexibility for DCPS schools.
Create competitive pressures	Charter quality	+ According to a recent CREDO study, D.C.'s charter schools are among the best in the country relative to district schools.
	Enrollment	+ Charters enroll nearly half of all public school students in Washington, D.C. o Student enrollment has been increasing for both sectors since 2012-2013 due to population growth and a declining private sector.[14]
+ Factor supporting engagement | – Factor suppressing engagement | o Factor neither supporting nor suppressing engagement		

*A long list of potential stakeholders drive whether and how districts engage charters, including unions, parents, and the business community. Across our sites, however, three in particular stood out: philanthropic organizations, advocacy organizations, and politicians. We therefore focus on these groups.

The path forward

In 2015, DC PCSB Executive Director Scott Pearson and DC PCSB Chairman John "Skip" McKoy published an op-ed in *Education Next* expressing their belief that the city's students would best be served by a school system consisting of both district and charter schools, which would give families more choices and reduce the pressure to regulate charters.[15] However, regardless of the merits of this position, maintaining a stable balance between the two superpowers may be easier said than done. Though a recent increase in the city's population has led to an uptick in both district and charter enrollment, it is unclear whether DCPS will be able to maintain its market share if total enrollment stabilizes.

Some charter operators have also expressed frustration with the district, claiming that it is withholding facilities from them and making poor investments. For example, the city spent $122 million remodeling Dunbar High School (completed in 2013), while charter operators have built new facilities for much less.[16]

At the same time, a growing number of new charters are directly competing with DCPS schools. For example, in 2014, a new charter elementary school with a science and technology focus opened across the street from a DCPS elementary school with the same focus. Chancellor Henderson likened the move to cannibalism: "Either we want neighborhood schools or we want cannibalism, but you can't have both." Pearson's response? "[P]rotecting a traditional school is no reason to keep a great charter school from opening its doors."[17]

Only time will tell whether D.C.'s superpower summit is a prelude to lasting peace. Perhaps the recently launched task force on collaboration will draw up a treaty that pleases both sides. Still, much will depend on how each sector's market share shifts in the next few years, which could tip the balance of power.

Endnotes

1. District of Columbia Public Charter Schools Board (DC PCSB), "Historical Enrollment – Public Schools," https://data.dcpcsb.org/Enrollment-/Historial-Enrollment-Public-Schools/3db5-ujzr.
2. In some examples of district-charter engagement, like this one, it is difficult to distinguish between city-led and district-led initiatives.
3. E. L. Haynes Public Charter School, "Convening Practitioners," http://www.elhaynes.org/innovate-practitioners.php.
4. Ibid.
5. M. Chandler, "Wait-list Numbers are up for District Schools," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dc-school-wait-lists-range-from-zero-to-1000-plus/2015/04/08/53f4cef0-de15-11e4-a1b8-2ed88bc190d2_story.html.
6. Friends of Choice in Urban Schools (FOCUS), "Access to Former DCPS School Buildings," focusdc.org/facilities.
7. The district need is essentially having the capacity to serve all types of students across all wards (which becomes more difficult as the number of traditional schools declines).
8. E. Brown, "D.C. School Parents Struggle with Waitlist Shuffle," *Washington Post*, September 9, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dc-school-parents-struggle-with-wait-list-shuffle/2012/09/09/6b10eb26-f2f1-11e1-adc6-87dfa8eff430_story.html.
9. For example, the gains that Washington, D.C. students made on the last administration of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) outpaced the gains that students made in any other state.
10. National Research Council, "An Evaluation of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia: Reform in a Changing Landscape" (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2015), http://www.nap.edu/catalog/21743/an-evaluation-of-the-public-schools-of-the-district-of-columbia.
11. This group has been defined as students who are homeless, in the foster care system, qualify for Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF), or are in high school, but over-age.
12. D.C. Advisory Committee on Student Assignment, "Final Recommendations on Student Assignment Policies and DCPS School Boundaries," 2014, http://dme.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dme/publication/attachments/Final%20Recommendations%20on%20Student%20Assignment%208-18-14_0.pdf.
13. In Washington, D.C., the mayor "controls" the district in that she appoints the chancellor, and there is no elected school board.
14. National Center for Education Statistics, *Private School Universe Survey (PSS), 2001–02 through 2011–12*, "Private Elementary and Secondary Schools, Enrollment, Teachers, and High School Graduates, by State: Selected Years, 2001 through 2011," Table 205.80 (table prepared May 2013) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2014), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_205.80.asp?current=yes.
15. S. Pearson and J. McKoy, "D.C. Students Benefit from Mix of Charter and Traditional Schools," *Education Next* 15, no. 3 (Summer 2015), http://educationnext.org/d-c-students-benefit-mix-charter-traditional-schools/.
16. C. Hayes et al. (The Finance Project), and J. Silverstein et al. (Augenblick, Palaich, and Associates), "Cost of Student Achievement: Report of the DC Education Adequacy Study," report to the District of Columbia deputy mayor for education, December 20, 2013, http://dme.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dme/publication/attachments/DC%20ADEQUACY%20STUDY_FULL%20REPORT.pdf.
17. E. Brown, "New D.C. Charter School Highlights Debate over Planning," *Washington Post*, July 5, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/new-dc-charter-school-highlights-debate-over-planning/2014/07/05/e0273644-02ea-11e4-b8ff-89afd3fad6bd_story.html.