Wave

of the FUTURE
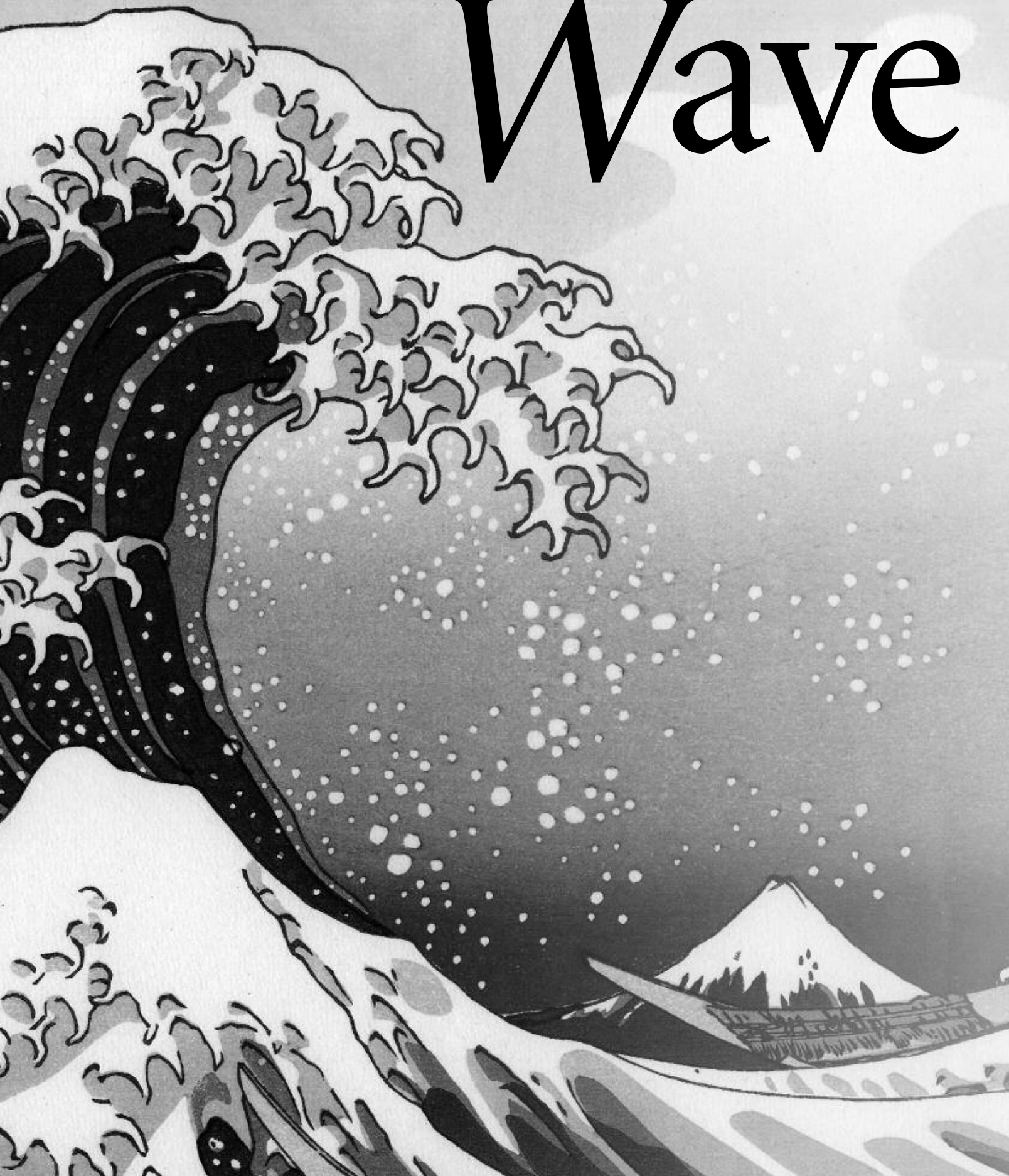
Why charter schools should replace failing urban schools

BY ANDY SMARICK

In a decade and a half, the charter school movement has gone from a glimmer in the eyes of a few Minnesota reformers to a maturing sector of America's public education system. Now, like all 15-year-olds, chartering must find its own place in the world.
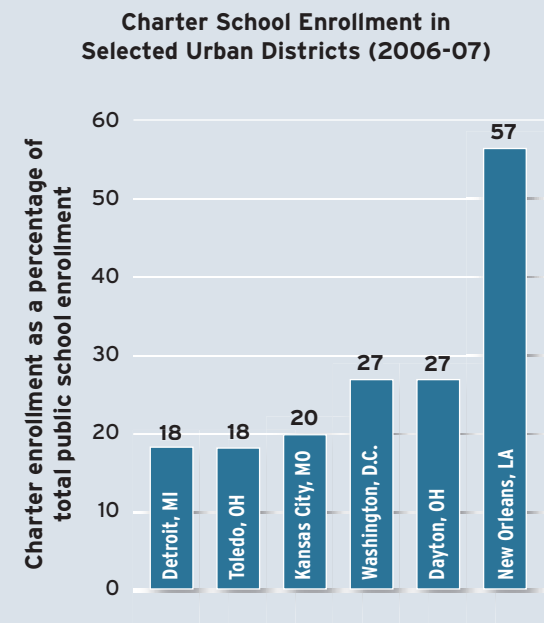
First, advocates must answer a fundamental question: What type of relationship should the nascent charter sector have with the long-dominant district sector? The tension between the two is at the heart of every political, policy, and philosophical tangle faced by the charter movement.

But charter supporters lack a consistent vision. This motley crew includes civil rights activists, free market economists, career public-school educators, and voucher proponents. They have varied aspirations for the movement and feelings toward the traditional system. Such differences are part of the movement's DNA: a National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) study found that the nation's charter laws cite at least 18 different goals, including spurring competition, increasing professional opportunities for teachers, and encouraging greater use of technology.

Because of its uniqueness, chartering is unable to look to previous reform efforts for guidance. No K–12 reform has so fundamentally questioned the basic assumptions—school assignments

KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI, (1760–1849)

Gaining Strength (Figure 1)

Although charter schools educate only 2 percent of America's public school students, in some urban areas the charter presence is considerably larger.

Charter School Enrollment in Selected Urban Districts (2006-07)

Charter enrollment as a percentage of total public school enrollment

- Detroit, MI: 18
- Toledo, OH: 18
- Kansas City, MO: 20
- Washington, D.C.: 27
- Dayton, OH: 27
- New Orleans, LA: 57

SOURCES: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

based on residence, centralized administrative control, schools lasting in perpetuity—underlying the district model of public education. Even the sweeping standards and assessments movement of the last 20 years, culminating in No Child Left Behind, takes for granted and makes use of the district sector.

Though few charter advocates have openly wrestled with this issue, two camps have organically emerged. The first sees chartering as an education system operating alongside traditional districts. This camp contends that the movement can provide more options and improved opportunities, particularly to disadvantaged students, by simply continuing to grow and serve more families.

The second group sees chartering as a tool to help the traditional sector improve. Chartering, the argument goes, can spur district improvement through a blend of gentle competitive nudging and neighborly information sharing.

Both camps are deeply mistaken. For numerous policy and political reasons, without a radical change in tactics the movement won't be able to sustain even its current growth rate. And neither decades of sharing best practices nor the introduction of charter competition has caused districts to markedly improve their performance.

Both camps have accepted an exceptionally limited view of what this sector might accomplish. Chartering's potential extends far beyond the role of stepchild or assistant to districts. The only course that is sustainable, for both chartering and urban education, embraces a third, more expansive view of the movement's future: replace the district-based system in America's large cities with fluid, self-improving systems of charter schools.

A Parallel System

Charter advocates are rightfully proud of their achievements. As of spring 2007, 4,046 charter schools were serving more than 1.1 million children across 40 states and the District of Columbia. In a number of cities, charters educate a significant proportion of public school students (see Figure 1). But when compared to the expanse of the traditional district-based system and the educational needs of low-income families, the movement's accomplishments are modest.

Nationwide, only 2 percent of public school students attend charters. Over the last five years, an average of 335 new charters started annually. At this rate, it would take until 2020 for chartering to corner just 5 percent of the national market. Even these humble figures inflate the movement's true national standing. In 2007 nearly two-thirds of charter schools were in only seven states. Today, 24 states have less than 1 percent of their students in charter schools. Though strong expansion continues in places like California and Florida, the 2006–07 school year saw 26 states open five or fewer new schools, while 5 states—because of closures—began the school year with fewer charters than they had the year before.

None of this, however, should be taken as an assault on charters' popularity or effectiveness. In New York, 12,000 students are on charter wait lists; in Massachusetts 19,000; in Pennsylvania 27,000. Students on all of the nation's charter wait lists would fill an estimated 1,121 new charter schools.

Research on student achievement in charters is encouraging. A recent analysis of the charter school studies since 2001 that measured student or school performance over time—the ideal way to measure a school's "value added"—reported that 29 of 33 studies found charters performing as well as or better than traditional public schools. The *New York Times Magazine* spotlighted charter networks KIPP, Uncommon Schools, and

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Achievement First in a major feature on how to close the achievement gap. Yet despite these successes, chartering's current status and growth trajectory won't enable it to become a parallel system large enough to serve the millions of needy students across the country within the foreseeable future.

Some might respond, "Then just accelerate growth." But the forces that have held chartering back over the last 15 years aren't going away. Worse, even today's growth levels may be in danger.

Twenty-five states have imposed some type of cap on charter expansion, and in eight states those limits currently constrain growth. The battle against caps must be fought state by state by under-resourced, overextended charter advocates against entrenched opponents. In New York, an expensive and sophisticated multiyear effort by charter advocates that was supported by the governor and New York City's mayor and schools chancellor finally resulted in legislation that raised the cap, but only by 100 schools. The new limit will be reached in just a few years.

Unequal financing is another obstacle. A Fordham Institute study found that on average charters receive $1,800 less per student than traditional public schools, despite serving more disadvantaged students. This discourages educators from starting new charters and traditional schools from converting. It also inhibits existing charters from growing enrollment or expanding to new campuses. Facilities are a major piece of this puzzle. While traditional public schools are provided a building, charters still must find, secure, and pay for a roof and walls. Only 13 states and Washington, D.C., provide some sort of facilities assistance.

The greatest impediment to growth is the wide array of political, legal, and administrative attacks. Institutional players—teachers unions, school boards, and state and district administrators—frequently petition state leaders for charter caps and reduced charter funding and vigorously oppose alternative authorizers and facilities aid. The nationwide Democratic landslide in the 2006 elections left many state governments less charter-friendly. For example, Ted Strickland, Ohio's new Democratic governor, made a moratorium on new charters one of his top priorities.

In a number of states, most recently Ohio and Michigan, coalitions have attacked chartering through the courts. Though these challenges have been beaten back so far, even one loss could force the closure of hundreds of schools. A 2006 Florida Supreme Court decision was foreboding. Striking down the state's voucher plan for contravening the state constitution's requirement of a "uniform" public education system, the court opened the door to challenges to the state's 350 charters, which, by definition, are not uniform.

Finally, chartering is held back by its administrative arrangements. Ninety percent of authorizers are local school districts, many of which view charters as an administrative inconvenience, competitive nuisance, or worse. In a NAPCS survey of charter school leaders, nearly two-thirds said working with the district was a problem. This summer, a high-performing KIPP charter school in Annapolis, Maryland, was forced to close because it couldn't find a permanent facility, even though the school district, according to its own study, had 900 empty seats in a nearby, underutilized school. Responding to the school's pleas for help, the district's superintendent told the local newspaper, "It's not my responsibility. It's not my school."

The "parallel system" approach to chartering's future rests on two mistaken assumptions: first, that by simply creating new schools and not purposely antagonizing the traditional system, chartering wouldn't attract the ire of defenders of the status quo; and second, that if chartering proved successful and popular, the sky was the limit on growth. As it turned out, district stakeholders have fought charters tooth and nail from the beginning, and they have erected policy obstacles that have severed the link between charter demand and supply.

The District Partner

The second camp envisions a vastly improved *traditional* school system, achieved through charter cooperation. This group believes that consistent collaboration between the two sectors would enable charters to experiment and then share lessons learned so all students, the vast majority of whom still attend traditional public schools, could benefit. "I believe that districts and charters will benefit by building more collaborative relationships," says Tom Hutton, a staff attorney for the National School Boards Association and a former board member of the Thurgood Marshall Charter School in Washington, D.C.

Like Hutton, many in this camp are veterans of the traditional system who recognize the value of chartering. But they assume district immortality—districts have been the sole delivery system of public education for generations—and believe a collaborative relationship to be wise, pragmatic, and ultimately necessary. The late Appleton, Wisconsin, superintendent Tom Scullen supported charters within his district but cautioned, "Charter schooling will fail if it tries to become a second track of public education. There isn't enough money to support two systems." Deborah McGriff, executive vice president of Edison Schools and former Detroit superintendent, agrees: "Charters need to start thinking about how we move from suspicion and competition with districts to collaboration and cooperation."

This collaborative relationship is becoming institutionalized. The federal Charter School Program, which provides charter start-up funds, requires that states disseminate charters' best practices to districts. KIPP has an open-door policy for local teachers and principals; they are welcome to

visit and take away whatever lessons they can. Funders in particular are buying into this strategy. NewSchools Venture Fund, whose goal is to improve school districts, invests in charter entrepreneurs in the hope that they can "spark broader transformation in the public school system." One of the Boston Foundation's high priorities in its education giving is supporting the sharing of effective practices between chartered and traditional schools.
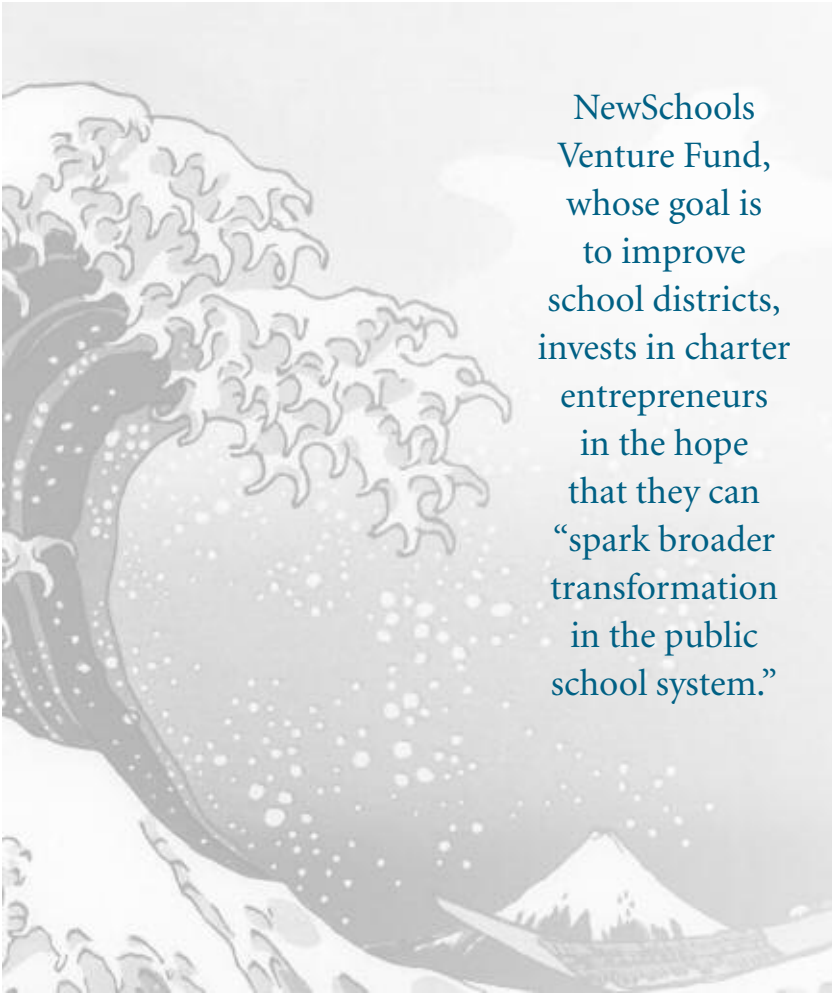
Though the move toward greater cooperation has emotional appeal, to embrace it you have to believe that districts, including major urban districts, are both willing and able to change and significantly improve student achievement at scale. Sadly, there is *prima facie* evidence that they are not. The achievement gap has been well documented for 40 years: in the Coleman Report, NAEP data, SAT scores, and state assessments. Given the threefold increase in per-pupil spending and countless policy changes, blue-ribbon panel recommendations, and foundation initiatives in the intervening years, it is undeniable that districts have already tried, or have been forced to try, to shape up.

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Diane Ravitch recently reported in the *Education Gadfly* (June 7, 2007) on the disappointing achievement scores from New York City, whose much-heralded schools leader, Joel Klein, has implemented some of the nation's most aggressive reforms. Ravitch found that during Klein's five-year tenure academic gains have been smaller than during the previous five years and that the reading scores of cohorts of students are actually declining as they progress through the system. New York's inability to improve despite major interventions is far from unique. NAEP's Trial Urban District Assessment, which measured the performance of 11 large urban systems in 2005, provides compelling evidence of the futility of district-based reforms: even the highest-performing district studied (Charlotte) had only 29 percent of its 8th graders at or above proficient in reading.

It is unreasonable to believe that charter collaboration will significantly alter these stubbornly disappointing district results. High-performing low-income schools, though too rare, have been documented for decades, and yet their lessons have never been translated into comprehensive district improvement. This is despite major efforts to spread best practices widely, including the work of education schools and $15 billion spent annually on teacher professional development. All in all, the uncomfortable but unavoidable question for collaboration advocates becomes, why should chartering invest in a strategy—helping major urban districts solve the achievement gap—that has consistently failed for 40 years when pursued by others?

Many strong believers in school choice, myself included, were convinced that the competitive pressure exerted by charters would lead to a renaissance in the traditional system. The vast district improvements we expected never materialized. The clearest evidence comes from Dayton, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., two cities with significant charter sectors.

In the nation's capital, 26 percent of students attend one of the city's 71 charter schools. The city's charter sector is remarkably innovative and energetic, including such standouts as KIPP KEY Academy, the SEED School, and DC Prep. Nevertheless, the District's traditional system remains among the very worst in the nation. Of the 11 cities participating in the NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment in 2005, Washington, D.C., had the lowest scores in math and reading in both grades tested. Among its 8th-grade students, only 12 percent reached proficiency in reading and 7 percent in math. A Progressive Policy Institute study of D.C.'s charter experience summarized the situation perfectly: "There is no

clear evidence that charter schools have had a direct impact on student achievement in DCPS schools or otherwise driven systemic reform."

Charters educate 28 percent of Dayton's students. Last year, the district reached only one of 25 state indicators and failed to make AYP. Seventy and 56 percent of its 8th graders failed to reach proficiency in math and reading, respectively. Residents are understandably frustrated: a 2005 Fordham Foundation survey found that 69 percent of Dayton residents are in favor of either major change from the district or an entirely new education system.

Some studies, like those by Hoxby (see "Rising Tide," *research*, Winter 2001) and by Holmes, Desimone, and Rupp (see "Friendly Competition," *research*, Winter 2006) have found a small bump in a district's achievement when it faces charter competition. Bifulco and Ladd (see "Results from the Tar Heel State," *research*, Fall 2005) and Buddin and Zimmer, however, found none. There are legitimate disagreements about the influence of additional factors in these studies, such as the amount of competition, the policy environment, and the type of test data used. But when this research is considered alongside our other experience, the only fair conclusion is that competition hasn't dramatically altered district performance for the better.

Charter competition has caused one unexpected and fascinating phenomenon. When facing a growing number of charters, districts turn to advertising. In January 2006, the Boston Teachers Union and the district were in negotiations to spend $100,000 to promote the virtues of traditional public schools to families choosing charters. Also in early 2006, the Cincinnati district sent letters and held information sessions designed to have charter families reenroll in traditional public schools. In May 2007, the St. Louis district awarded a no-bid contract to a marketing firm to "drive the message of the negative impact of charter schools." Seemingly unable to improve results, districts rely on public relations to stem the migration of students to other schools.

Why is it that major urban school districts are unable to improve student learning at scale? A compelling argument, and a roadmap for charter schooling's future, can be found in Ted Kolderie's excellent and underappreciated book, *Creating the Capacity for Change*. Kolderie applies to K–12 education the lessons Harvard economist Clayton Christensen has drawn

Watching New Orleans

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans decided to rebuild its decimated public education system largely as a system of charter schools. The conditions were ideal for this groundbreaking shift: a citywide consensus that the old system had failed; a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to build a new system from scratch; the availability of federal school start-up funds; and the keen interest of education entrepreneurs, foundations, and support organizations in seeing this bold reform succeed.

Two years into the rebuilding effort, the Crescent City has what might be thought of as a chartered system in the making. First, 60 percent of students are in charters. Second, there is significant diversity in the types of school available, and parents are exercising choice. Third, and most interesting, there is diversity in the suppliers of K–12 public education: the Orleans Parish School board oversees a number of traditional public schools and charters; the state board of education authorizes several charters; and the Recovery School District (an entity created before Katrina to assume control of failing city schools) manages both charters and traditional public schools.

Two questions will determine whether New Orleans will continue moving toward the nation's first fully chartered system. As the city stabilizes, will leaders resist the urge to consolidate power into a single district, instead allowing permanent diversity in schools and school suppliers? Will the city be willing to consistently close poor-performing schools and open new highly accountable, choice-driven institutions so a true market of public education can emerge?

from the private sector. Christensen, studying how industries evolve and improve over time, found that critical advancements don't come from old firms changing their ways. They come from new firms (or independent subsidiaries) entering the market, introducing new products and systems, and responding nimbly to the demands of consumers.

When an industry experiences a major change, existing firms find themselves unable to adjust to navigate the new world. Every aspect of its identity—culture, staffing, practices, priorities—was geared toward succeeding in the old environment. When the environment changes, it's impossible for the horse and carriage to transform into a steam locomotive.

The implications for public education are profound. For 150 years, public schooling has been a one-factory town: a board- and superintendent-led district manages, staffs, and oversees an area's entire portfolio of public schools. But in this time, the world has become a radically different place and the expectations of schools have changed even more. As Kolderie points out, if private firms, which are built to respond to competition, are unable to make this kind of leap, we can't expect gigantic, byzantine school systems, which are insulated from competition, shackled by union contracts, and constrained by a sticky web of regulations, to do so.

The system is the issue. The solution isn't an improved traditional district; it's an entirely different delivery system for public education: systems of chartered schools.

A Transformed System

Charter advocates should strive to have every urban public school be a charter. That is, each school should have significant control over its curriculum, methods, budget, staff, and calendar. Each school should have a contract that spells out its mission and measurable objectives, including guaranteeing that all students achieve proficiency in basic skills. Each school should be held accountable by an approved public body.

"Charter" will no longer be seen as an adjective, a way to describe a type of school, but as a verb, an orderly and sensible process for developing, replicating, operating, overseeing, and closing schools. The system would be fluid, self-improving, and driven by parents and public authority, ensuring the system uses the best of market and government forces. Schools that couldn't attract families would close, as would those that ran afoul of authorizers for academic, financial, or management failures. School startups, both the number and their characteristics, would reflect the needs of communities and the interests of students, but would also be tightly regulated to generate a high probability of school success.

So, while the government's role would still be significant, it would no longer operate the city's entire portfolio of public schools. Instead, it would take on a role similar to the FAA's role in monitoring the airline industry or a health department's monitoring of restaurants. Today, we take airline safety for granted and make our choices based on service, connections, and so on. Similarly, we know all restaurants have fire exits and meet food safety standards, so we choose based on our tastes and schedules. A well-regulated chartered school system could guarantee that all public schools were providing a safe, high-quality education and properly managing operations, thereby allowing families to choose a school based on other criteria.

The government's substantial oversight role in guaranteeing safety and quality would differentiate a charter system from a universal voucher program. To many, a voucher system would undesirably blur the lines between church and state, add the profit motive to schooling, remove the "public" from K–12 education, and leave too much to the vicissitudes of the market. By contrast, in a chartered system, public schools would be nonreligious, managed by nonprofits, overseen by a public authority, and held to clear performance standards.

But a chartered system would capitalize on market forces largely absent from district systems, such as constant innovation, competition, and replication. Replication is arguably the most valuable. Chartering has not only created some of America's finest schools, it has enabled their leaders to identify the characteristics that made those schools so remarkable and then develop systems for creating additional, equally successful schools. In addition to well-known charter management

organizations like KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools, new ones continue to emerge: Green Dot, High Tech High, Aspire, Noble Street, IDEA, and more. Major funders like the Charter School Growth Fund and NewSchools Venture Fund are helping other high-performing charters expand as well.

So how do we transform today's urban district systems into chartered systems? Absent political realities, the shift could be quite simple. Any district could decide tomorrow to relinquish day-to-day control of its schools and develop performance contracts with each. Every school could develop its own governing board and acquire control of its budget, staffing, and curriculum. The district could then change from a central operator to an authorizer, monitoring schools, closing them when necessary, and allowing new ones to open. The "every school a charter school" idea is not new; others, most prominently Paul Hill of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, have been writing variations on this theme for some time.

Unfortunately, for reasons having more to do with power than student learning, this scenario is highly unlikely. Most districts assiduously avoid the loss of one school, let alone all schools. When one of Washington, D.C.'s highest-performing traditional public schools pursued plans to convert to a charter in 2006, the district agreed to several of its demands in exchange for the school's agreement to stop flirting with charter status. This spring, after faculty at Locke High School in Los Angeles signed petitions to convert into a Green Dot charter, district officials scrambled to put together a counterproposal and convinced some teachers to rescind their signatures.
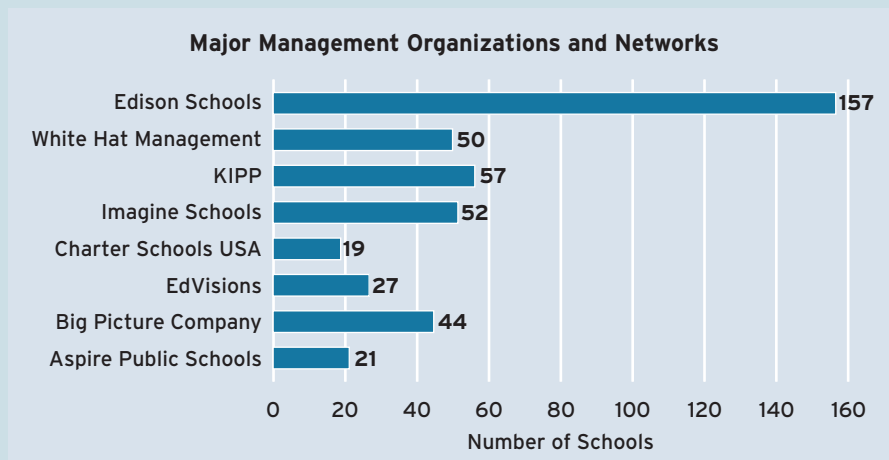
No government entity likes to lose control of any of its components and the budget and prestige that go with them, especially when the loss suggests a failure by the organization. But shifting from an operator into an authorizer would mean cutting hundreds of central office jobs as well: since charters handle their own transportation, facilities, staffing, and more, district employees filling those responsibilities would become redundant. Such a shift, then, would be vigorously opposed by district staff and those who represent them. Countless powerful organizations, like unions, book publishers, and service providers, would also be adversely affected by a decentralized system of schools.

Clearly we can't expect the political process to swiftly bring about charter districts in all of America's big cities. However, if charter advocates carefully target specific systems with an exacting strategy, the current policy environment will allow them to create examples of a new, high-performing system of public education in urban America.

Here, in short, is one roadmap for chartering's way forward: First, commit to drastically increasing the charter market share in a few select communities until it is the

Replicating Charter Success (Figure 2)

A number of organizations are reporting that chartering can be brought to scale by sharing services and practices among networks of independent schools.

Major Management Organizations and Networks

Organization	Number of Schools
Edison Schools	157
White Hat Management	50
KIPP	57
Imagine Schools	52
Charter Schools USA	19
EdVisions	27
Big Picture Company	44
Aspire Public Schools	21

Number of Schools

SOURCES: Organization websites, accessed October 1, 2007

dominant system and the district is reduced to a secondary provider. The target should be 75 percent. Second, choose the target communities wisely. Each should begin with a solid charter base (at least 5 percent market share), a policy environment that will enable growth (fair funding, nondistrict authorizers, and no legislated caps), and a favorable political environment (friendly elected officials and editorial boards, a positive experience with charters to date, and unorganized opposition). For example, in New York a concerted effort could be made to site in Albany or Buffalo a large percentage of the 100 new charters allowed under the raised cap. Other potentially fertile districts include Denver, Detroit, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, New Orleans, Oakland, and Washington, D.C.

Third, secure proven operators to open new schools. To the greatest extent possible, growth should be driven by replicating successful local charters and recruiting high-performing operators from other areas (see Figure 2). Fourth, engage key allies like Teach For America, New Leaders for New Schools, and national and local foundations to ensure the effort has the human and financial capital needed. Last, commit to rigorously assessing charter performance in each community and working with authorizers to close the charters that fail to significantly improve student achievement.

In total, these strategies should lead to rapid, high-quality charter growth and the development of a public school marketplace marked by parental choice, the regular start-up of new schools, the improvement of middling schools,

the replication of high-performing schools, and the shuttering of low-performing schools.

As chartering increases its market share in a city, the district will come under growing financial pressure. The district, despite educating fewer and fewer students, will still require a large administrative staff to process payroll and benefits, administer federal programs, and oversee special education. With a lopsided adult-to-student ratio, the district's per-pupil costs will skyrocket.

At some point along the district's path from monopoly provider to financially unsustainable marginal player, the city's investors and stakeholders—taxpayers, foundations, business leaders, elected officials, and editorial boards—are likely to demand fundamental change. That is, eventually the financial crisis will become a political crisis. If the district has progressive leadership, one of two best-case scenarios may result. The district could voluntarily begin the shift to an authorizer, developing a new relationship with its schools and reworking its administrative structure to meet the new conditions. Or, believing the organization is unable to make this change, the district could gradually transfer its schools to an established authorizer.

A more probable district reaction to the mounting pressure would be an aggressive political response. Its leadership team might fight for a charter moratorium or seek protection from the courts. Failing that, they might lobby for additional funding so the district could maintain its administrative structure despite the vast loss of students. Reformers should expect and prepare for this phase of the transition process.

In many ways, replacing the district system seems inconceivable, almost heretical. Districts have existed for generations, and in many minds, the traditional system is synonymous with public education. However, the history of urban districts' inability to provide a high-quality education to their low-income students is nearly as long. It's clear that we need a new type of system for urban public education, one that is able to respond nimbly to great school success, chronic school failure, and everything in between. A chartered system could do precisely that.

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