Fulfilling the Compact: Building a Breakthrough, Results-Driven Public Charter School Sector

Prepared for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools by Public Impact

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Public Impact's mission is to dramatically improve learning outcomes for all children in the U.S., with a special focus on students who are not served well. A national education policy and management consulting firm based in Chapel Hill, N.C., Public Impact is a team of researchers, thought leaders, tool-builders, and on-the-ground consultants working with leading education reformers. For more on Public Impact, please visit: www.publicimpact.com.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2005, the Task Force on Charter School Quality and Accountability issued *Renewing the Compact*, a position statement for the charter school sector that presented recommendations for achieving the goals of growth and quality. This report evaluates the sector's progress on those goals and recommends **bold actions** to capitalize on its successes while confronting persistent challenges. By taking these bold actions now, critical stakeholders can **build a breakthrough sector** and **create a results-driven culture**, which will improve the impact of charter schools on student outcomes and the education system.

Positive Developments and Trends

Research and expert opinion spotlighted several main positive developments or trends in the sector during the past five to 10 years.

- **Proof points of quality.** Numerous charter schools and networks demonstrate that traditionally underserved students can achieve at high levels.
- **Flood of entrepreneurial talent.** A new generation of talented, motivated teachers, school leaders, and entrepreneurs has been attracted to public schooling through the promise of charter schools.
- **Emergence of a new school governance model.** The charter sector has created a new type of relationship between individual schools and the entities that create and oversee them.
- **Increased recognition of quality and accountability.** Authorizers, policymakers, and sector leaders increasingly focus on accountability for student learning outcomes.
- **Policy and advocacy "wins."** Recent years have seen significant and steady progress on key charter policy issues and in growing public and political support.
- **Hopeful signs for charter funding.** Federal funding has combined with steady philanthropic support for start-ups to fuel the sector's expansion, and recent initiatives have provided needed assistance for facilities funding.

Recommendations: Bold Actions for Building a Breakthrough Sector and Creating a Results-Driven Culture

The charter sector has made significant progress in the areas noted above, but much important work remains. The bold actions that follow are organized according to two broad needs identified most often in the literature and by experts interviewed or surveyed for this report: 1) the need to build a breakthrough charter

sector by capitalizing on its capacity for innovation and its ability to scale successes; and 2) the need to create a results-driven culture across the sector.

Building a Breakthrough Sector

- **Make the charter sector the source of innovative solutions to public education's most pressing challenges.** Provide opportunities and new incentives for break-the-mold school models that address a wider variety of student and school needs.
- **Focus advocacy efforts on building broad support for a high-quality charter sector that can solve public education's most pressing challenges.** Advocate more forcefully and strategically for state policy changes in key areas of charter operations, and make a concerted effort to unite charter supporters in common policy battles at the federal and state levels.
- **Increase the supply of excellent new charter schools.** Attract and support talented people to open, lead, and govern high-performing charter schools.
- **Turbo-charge the growth of the highest-performing charter schools**. Create policies and practices that build the supply of high-quality seats by scaling up success much more quickly.

Creating a Results-Driven Culture

- **Hold authorizers accountable for outcomes.** Shine a light on authorizers that charter or fail to intervene in low-performing schools.
- **Make the charter sector the cutting edge of defining "success" and operating with transparency.** Use charter schools as laboratories for determining what constitutes success and how to measure it.
- **Close or intervene in persistently low-performing schools.** Enact automatic closure provisions and push authorizers to act in the face of true failure.

The charter sector has reached a crossroads. Its successes have been worth celebrating, and looking ahead, its promise is even greater. However, to realize that promise, leaders throughout the sector must commit to taking bold and often difficult or risky steps to confront the challenges of growth and quality.

Methodology

Public Impact worked closely with NAPCS to design a project framework that incorporated the principles and recommendations from *Renewing the Compact* (see Appendix III). We then conducted an extensive review of key publications within this framework, relying to the extent possible on existing empirical research, but also considering observational research and written expert opinion to provide a full picture of the sector's progress (see Appendix IV for sources). We also interviewed 20 individuals with deep knowledge of the sector (see Appendix V), and collected survey responses from 48 education leaders, including representatives of charter schools, state charter support organizations, incubators, think tanks, advocacy groups, foundations, authorizers, and government agencies. For the reader's reference, we also drafted a figure and accompanying narrative description of the sector showing how its stakeholders affect student outcomes and the education system (see Appendix VI: How the Charter Sector Can Transform Public Education).

INTRODUCTION: RENEWING THE COMPACT, 2005–2012

The charter sector is at a turning point. By many indications, charter schools have broader support than ever before. And yet, significant threats loom, including uneven quality, thin leadership and teaching pipelines, and excessive reliance on external funding. The capacity of sector leaders to seize this moment and respond to these challenges will go a long way toward determining whether the sector reaches its potential.

In January 2005, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) appointed a Task Force on Charter School Quality and Accountability, which issued *Renewing the Compact*, a position statement for the charter sector with recommendations for simultaneously achieving growth and quality.[1] In early 2012, NAPCS commissioned Public Impact to assist it in assessing the degree to which the sector has met the goals proposed in *Renewing the Compact*, and in charting a course for the future of the sector.

Renewing the Compact drew together the opinions of distinguished charter sector leaders and policy thinkers into seven principles for quality chartering and a set of 12 reflections and recommendations for the sector (see Appendices I and II). These principles and recommendations aimed to confront challenges facing the sector, and can be summarized in overarching goals in five key areas:

- **Achievement.** Focus resolutely on student achievement.
- **Talent.** Draw talented individuals to positions in charter classrooms and school-level leadership, and on charter boards.
- **Funding.** Fully and equitably fund charter schools.
- **Support.** Increase attention to quality in policy advocacy, authorizing, and charter support.
- **Scale.** Scale up successful charter schools and responsibly close those that fail.

This report summarizes the sector's progress over the past seven years in relation to these broad goals. Like *Renewing the Compact*, this report draws extensively on the opinions of charter sector leaders, including some who contributed to the original *Compact* document.

This report summarizes positive developments and trends in the sector, and persistent challenges. It then provides a detailed assessment of how, through a set of bold actions, critical stakeholders can capitalize on the sector's strengths and address its challenges.

SUMMARY FINDINGS: PROGRESS AND PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

Education leaders have long understood the charter sector's potential to transform public schooling. As early as 1990, before the first charter law had even been written, leaders envisioned different methods of forming and operating public schools. To some, the core innovations of the sector are embodied in these methods: new authority structures designed to withdraw the "exclusive franchise" that districts previously held over student assignment, school operations, and local education policy.[2] To others, the sector realized its promise when these new schools began to achieve improved student results.

The charter sector has made important progress in several of the areas in which it has exhibited transformational potential, yet persistent challenges remain. This section summarizes positive developments and trends in the charter sector in recent years, as well as persistent challenges facing the sector.

Positive Developments and Trends

The first question asked of each interviewee and survey respondent concerned the most positive developments or trends in the sector over the past five to 10 years. Research and this expert opinion coalesced around several positive developments or trends in the sector during that period—developments that closely align with the central goals of *Renewing the Compact*.

Summary: Positive Developments and Trends

Proof points of quality

Numerous charter schools and networks demonstrate that traditionally underserved students can achieve at high levels.

Flood of entrepreneurial talent

A new generation of talented, motivated teachers, school leaders, and entrepreneurs has been attracted to public schooling through the promise of charters.

Emergence of a new school governance model

The charter sector has created a new type of relationship between individual schools and the entities that create and oversee them.

Increased recognition of quality and accountability

Authorizers, policymakers, and sector leaders increasingly focus on accountability for student learning outcomes.

Policy and advocacy "wins"

Recent years have seen significant and steady progress on key charter policy issues and in growing public and political support.

Hopeful signs for charter funding

Federal funding has combined with steady philanthropic support for start-ups to fuel the sector's expansion, and recent initiatives have provided needed assistance for facilities funding.

Proof points of quality. For years, powerful anecdotes have emerged about high-performing, achievement gap-closing charter schools. For example, at Amistad Academy in 2008, 82 percent of students met state standards in reading, 94 percent in math, and 97 percent in writing. The school's students were nearly all African-American or Latino, and 68 percent qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.[3] Two of Rocketship Education's schools are among the 15 highest-performing high-poverty schools in all of California. DSST Public Schools, with a mostly minority population, boasted the second-highest longitudinal growth rate in Colorado student test scores in 2010.[4]

Likewise, an increasing number of school networks show success at scale, such as KIPP, Uncommon Schools, Aspire Public Schools, YES Prep Public Schools, and IDEA Public Schools. Many stand-alone schools have also achieved strong results, including Jumoke Academy, E.L. Haynes Public Charter School, and Seed Academy/Harvest Preparatory School, to name just a few. Because of schools like these, "few debate one fact about the charter sector: the existence of a subset of schools that induce extremely high academic progress and achievement by children who enter years behind, many of whom are poor and a disproportionate number of whom are racial minorities."[5]

New Orleans dramatically illustrates the potential for high-quality charter schools to be more than a marginal feature of a city's education landscape. Nearly 80 percent of the city's students attended charter schools in 2011–12. On average, those schools have outperformed traditional public schools statewide, and the percentage of students attending schools designated as "failing" by state performance standards has dropped dramatically.[6] Other cities, including Boston, Washington, D.C., and New York City, are emerging as additional examples of city systems experiencing widespread success and marked growth in the number of students attending charter schools.[7]

Flood of entrepreneurial talent. According to one national study, charter leaders "overwhelmingly

expressed belief that their success hinges on the strength of their people, primarily in schools, but also in the central office."[8] Fortunately, many charter schools have succeeded in attracting talented candidates to teaching and school leadership positions, bringing a new generation of teachers and leaders to the sector, and to public schools.

The talent sources include teacher and leader training organizations such as Teach For America (TFA), The New Teacher Project (TNTP), Building Excellent Schools (BES), and the Broad Residency, as well as local incubators, school leadership training programs, and some of the more established charter support organizations.[9] Some large nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) have started their own leadership training initiatives (e.g., KIPP's Fisher Fellowship), and some have gained authority to certify their own teachers (e.g., High Tech High).[10] The sector has brought in leaders with a broad range of professional experiences useful for the varied tasks required to open and operate new schools.[11]

Such leaders include those who pioneered CMOs, such as Aspire Public Schools and IDEA Public Schools, and new school models, such as Rocketship Education. The charter sector has also spawned numerous organizations designed to address the many challenges charter schools face. These include incubators, which focus on recruiting, training, and supporting high-quality leaders as they open and operate new charter schools. Other support organizations provide varied services including data analysis, instructional support, board training, facilities financing, and back-office and financial management systems and services.

Emergence of a new school governance model. The most innovative development the charter sector has introduced to public education may be the new relationship it created between individual charter schools, their boards of directors, and the authorizers that oversee them. Authorizers have become an industry of sorts, one which now boasts a vibrant national organization that supports and guides the development of quality authorizing policies and practices—the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA).

This new school governance model has generated research and thinking into how to make relationships between authorizers and schools work to produce excellent student learning outcomes. It has also increasingly spurred traditional school districts to adopt "portfolio strategies" through which they are opening new autonomous schools and giving existing schools more control over hiring and budgeting in exchange for heightened accountability, at least for segments of their populations.[12] New Orleans is the most advanced example—while not a conventional district, the Recovery School District (RSD) has become a symbol of the potential for dramatic shifts from traditional to nontraditional governance. Other cities, including New York, Chicago, Denver, Hartford, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., have introduced portfolio-style models into their districts.[13]

Increased recognition of quality and accountability. Among interviewees and survey respondents for this report, the most common topic mentioned in responses to questions about positive developments and trends in the sector was the increased recognition of the importance of quality. This was noted most consistently in relation to stricter and more well-developed authorizing processes but also with respect to the scrutiny authorizers, charter boards, and policymakers apply to student learning outcomes.

Among the recent wave of publications documenting rapid growth in the sector, most describe the importance of charter growth in terms of "growth with quality," calling to mind *Renewing the Compact*'s admonitions that "growth is not an end in itself" and "quality is more important than quantity."[14] To be sure, the charter sector has been home to vigorous debates about whether "quality" is being defined too narrowly based on student performance on standardized tests. But the sector has benefitted in

recent years from increasingly dominant voices calling for attention to quality—however defined—instead of simply regarding increased choice as "good" irrespective of quality.

The quantity/quality conundrum is most vexing in the context of high-stakes decisions to close or intervene in low-performing schools—a topic being discussed with increasing urgency by leaders across the sector. On the flip side, leaders now more than ever see consistent high performance as a gateway to replication of the best schools, and federal Charter School Program funding as a means to replicate high-performing models. As an example of the increased focus on these topics, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers and its partners won federal support in 2010 for the "Performance Management, Replication, and Closure (PMRC)" project, which aims to strengthen replication and closure policies across the country.[15]

Policy and advocacy "wins." Over the past seven years, charter advocates have spearheaded critical policy and advocacy "wins" in several states. In almost all cases, NAPCS's model charter school law has been instrumental in driving these changes. Maine passed a charter law in 2011 that closely tracks many of the model law's 20 "essential components"—leading Maine to vault to the top of the annual NAPCS model law rankings. In North Carolina, Louisiana, Tennessee, Michigan, Indiana, and Wisconsin, caps have been raised or lifted. New Mexico, Rhode Island, and Hawaii have passed important new quality-control measures. Tennessee, Illinois, Indiana, and Nevada have added new and more charter-friendly authorizers. Several cities and states, including South Carolina, Indiana, Texas, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, and Tennessee, have improved policies in the crucial areas of facilities and facilities funding. Although not universal, the general trend across the country has been toward more supportive charter laws.[16]

The sector has also seen strong support from politicians at the federal, state, and city levels. President Obama and Secretary Duncan have been vocal charter proponents at the federal level (likewise for Obama's 2008 opponent, John McCain, and his 2012 opponent, Mitt Romney). In addition, more governors and mayors from both sides of the aisle back reform agendas that include policy wins for charters.

Interviewees and survey respondents offered praise for NAPCS's model charter school law and related rankings, widely agreeing on their power in shaping charter policy discussions across the country.

Hopeful signs for charter funding. Although charter schools continue to receive inequitable per-pupil funding and facilities support from state and local sources,[17] federal and private funding have been a strong point. As noted above, the charter sector has fared well under the Obama administration, as it did under the Bush and Clinton administrations. In part, the administration has supported charters through strong federal funding. The sector has benefitted significantly from the Investing in Innovation ("i3") fund and the Race to the Top competition, as well as continuing support for the federal Charter Schools Program, which has awarded approximately $180 million per year to state education agencies every year for the past decade.[18]

The public charter school sector has also seen hopeful signs of increased support in the crucial areas of facilities and facilities financing. Nonprofit organizations have stepped in to offer grants, loans, and credit enhancements for charter schools that otherwise would face high interest rates or an inability to obtain financing on account of the risks they posed for lenders. Some community development organizations have added charters to their focus on building infrastructure in low-income neighborhoods. National foundations have also undertaken charter funding initiatives, and new nonprofit and for-profit enterprises have emerged focused solely on charter school facilities and facilities financing.[19]

Persistent Challenges

Interviewees and survey respondents also offered opinions on where the sector has struggled—where there have been recent negative developments or missed opportunities. Research and expert opinion emphasized the importance of several persistent challenges the sector would do well to address in the years ahead.

Summary: Persistent Challenges

Inadequate supply of new high-quality schools

Not enough strong charter founders exist to satisfy the need for high-performing charter schools.

Unfulfilled potential for breakthrough school models

Too few new school operators have departed dramatically from established school constructs in staffing and operations, and authorizers and policymakers have not done enough to encourage innovation within the charter sector.

Slow growth of the best charter schools

High-performing charter schools and CMOs are not growing quickly enough to meet demand, and most have limited growth ambitions.

Limited authorizer accountability for student results

Authorizers are not sufficiently accountable to the public for the results their schools achieve, and authorizers' portfolio outcomes lack transparency.

Lack of contribution to evolving attempts to define and measure success

Charter schools have too seldom served as laboratories to explore new standards for measuring student achievement in academic and non-academic areas.

Persistence of too many chronically low-performing charter schools

Although the sector has significantly increased its attention to quality, authorizers too rarely act to close low-performing schools.

Insufficient policies for funding, facilities, and autonomy

Most charter schools are still underfunded, struggle to find affordable facilities, and lack crucial autonomies.

Underdeveloped advocacy and public communications

Advocacy at the state and federal levels can be fragmented; too little is done to engage parents, the public, and community groups to build awareness and grassroots, quality-focused activism.

Inadequate supply of new high-quality schools. Today, the supply of high-quality charter schools falls far short of the need for better educational options. With approximately 2 million students in charter schools, the best 10 percent of charter school "seats"—across independently run schools and those in networks—are available to only 200,000 students.[20] Even the best 25 percent reach only half a million. At the sector's current growth rate, it will be over 10 years before the top 10 percent of seats are available to 1 million students. Meanwhile, the nation is home to more than 10 million students in poverty and millions more non-poor students who need better educational options. To meet this need, the sector must find more strong charter founders to satisfy the need for high-performing charter schools.

Incubators of promising charter school founders and leaders have begun to emerge in such states as Louisiana (New Orleans), Tennessee, Minnesota, and Colorado.[21] A small number of national organizations also aim to prepare individuals for charter leadership positions. Teacher preparation programs including Teach For America and The New Teacher Project bring numerous future school founders and leaders into charter schools every year. However, despite the successes and promise of programs like these, nationally there are too many locations these programs do not reach. Even in the locations they serve, demand often outpaces supply.

To meet this need, the sector must find more strong charter founders to satisfy the need for high-performing charter schools. When a region has a small charter sector, its schools may have little trouble filling these staff positions, often receiving many applicants per slot. But as the sector grows, schools may face more staffing challenges, and may find it particularly difficult to answer calls for experienced leaders or leadership diversity. More than two-thirds of charter school leaders say they expect to leave their schools within five years, and only half of their schools have succession plans in place.[22] Charter school teachers also tend to leave their schools after relatively brief tenures, creating recruitment and retention challenges for individual charter schools and

the sector as a whole. One study, for example, found that teacher turnover in charters is double the rate of district schools (charter turnover rates are more in line with the norm in professional jobs, while district attrition is very low).[23] Studies of high-performing CMOs question the long-term tenability of models that require teachers to work 60- to 80-hour weeks.[24] And although early-career charter school teachers appear to earn salaries similar to those in district schools, studies suggest pay may rise more over a teacher's career in district schools.[25]

Unfulfilled potential for breakthrough school models. The charter sector has seen the development of schools and networks that have adopted innovative school models, built breakthrough school cultures, or introduced dramatically new approaches to staffing, scheduling, or curriculum.[26]

However, education innovation is too often stifled by such barriers as state and federal policy, talent shortages, and limited resources.[27] There is also a dearth of financial and other supports pushing education innovators to "get in the game." Few authorizers or funders offer incentives for charter school founders to take risks by proposing dramatically different approaches to the design and running of schools.[28] Some sector leaders worry that authorizers may be sticking too closely to established models, taking too few chances on promising but unproven alternatives, and stifling innovation in the process.

Slow growth of the best charter networks. Although little research exists on the highest-performing independently operated schools, we do know that the highest-performing charter networks have shown exceptional promise to serve the students most in need. However, these networks' schools reach only a fraction of the students who could benefit from them. Five of the highest-performing CMOs together serve less than 48,000 students, and, as of 2009–10, all CMOs combined served only 228,000 students (14 percent of all charter students). More students—420,000 in 2009–10—remained on charter school waiting lists.[29]

CMOs add only 1.3 schools per year, on average. Some do not plan to grow beyond four or five schools. About half of the 29 CMOs polled in a 2010 survey planned to open 10 schools or fewer by 2025, and only five CMOs expressed an intention to open 30 or more schools by 2025.[30] Those that aim to expand dramatically face formidable growth barriers, including caps, inequitable funding, scarce facilities, talent shortages, a limited pool of authorizers, and potentially hostile local or district leadership.[31]

Limited authorizer accountability for student results. Charter school authorizers are intended to serve as gatekeepers who not only prevent poorly prepared applicants from founding schools, but also remove consistently low performers from the field. Unfortunately, authorizers do not always meet their responsibilities, and authorizer competence across the sector has been described as uneven at best.[32]

One reason authorizers tend toward lax oversight is because they are typically not held accountable for the performance of the schools they authorize. Authorizers undergo regular school evaluation reviews in Minnesota, but that is not the case in most states. Minnesota's authorizer review process started recently, so it is too soon to determine if the process has affected school quality.[33] As long as authorizers remain beyond reproach, the quality of the schools they authorize is likely to suffer.

Lack of contribution to evolving attempts to define and measure success. Charter schools have introduced some innovative ideas into public education, but as a sector they have yet to push the envelope on student assessment. Some charter leaders have spoken out against standardized testing and argued that such tests do not adequately measure holistic student outcomes, but no viable alternative for measuring student growth and achievement is readily apparent. As one interviewee lamented, "If the selling point [of charters] is our R&D sector, I would have expected to see more happening here."

The charter sector offers a unique opportunity for schools to experiment with new areas of assessment. Under customized contracts with authorizers, they could agree to measure personal characteristics like emotional intelligence, curiosity, and grit, or to experiment with new approaches to testing traditional academic concepts. Though the possibilities are vast, there has been little willingness on the part of charters and authorizers to invest in new assessment approaches—investments that could lead to the development of new assessments influential enough to lead to systemic change.

Persistence of too many chronically low-performing charter schools. Charter operators are increasingly adopting "quality" as their watchword, but this has not done enough to bring quality to the fore. Aside from authorizer accountability, one of the most important ways to regulate charter quality is to close failing schools—yet too few state policymakers or authorizers are actually taking steps to do this.

In 2010–11, just 6.2 percent of charter schools reviewed for renewal were closed, down from 8.8 percent in 2009–10 and 12.6 percent in 2008–09. It is unclear whether this decline reflects increases in quality, stronger interventions short of closure, changes in state laws or authorizer policies and practices, or political pressures.[34]

When authorizers close schools, they may lose fees and face angry parents and community members, as well as potential political backlash and legal challenges. To some extent, a school closure is more art than science, requiring a high degree of political sophistication and sensitivity. Closures are made all the more difficult and intimidating by a lack of clear guidance around when a closure is justified or necessary; the potential for interventions short of closure; and how best to manage closures.

Insufficient policies for funding, facilities, and autonomy. The policy environment for charter schools continues to improve in many states year after year, as noted above. However, in some vital aspects of charter operations—namely funding, facilities, and autonomy—improvement simply is not occurring fast enough, if at all.

Funding disparities for charters have not budged since 2005, when the Fordham Institute reported that average per-pupil charter funding as a percentage of school district funding was approximately 80 percent.[35] The 2009–10 report *Inequity Persists* found no improvement in this figure. Disparities in *urban* charter districts have even increased.[36] Based on 2009–10 data, the average per-pupil charter funding as a percentage of average district funding in urban districts was approximately 72 percent.[37] It is no wonder, then, that many charter schools remain dependent upon philanthropic support to survive. Most CMOs still receive about 13 percent of their total revenue from major gifts.[38] Independently operated charter schools often receive far less—sometimes nothing—in private support. In the long run, charters cannot expect to sustain their programs—or scale up as rapidly or successfully as some would like—without far more equitable public funding.

Inequitable access to facilities remains a similarly pressing problem. District schools are not responsible for locating and financing facilities, so more of their per-pupil funds can be funneled into instruction. In all but 15 states and the District of Columbia, however, charters must dip into even smaller pots of per-pupil funding to secure facilities before the funding of instruction can even begin.[39] This situation persists despite the fact that empty district buildings pepper the landscapes of many cities, and that some jurisdictions have passed laws ostensibly requiring districts to offer charters their unused facilities.[40]

On top of funding and facilities woes, charter schools still struggle to secure and defend the autonomies to which many highly successful charters credit their stellar results. These autonomies are part of the supposed bargain struck by sector advocates in creating and structuring charter laws: autonomy in exchange for heightened accountability. Even so, charter sector leaders continue to fight for essential

autonomies in key areas such as staffing, curriculum, scheduling, budgeting, and defining school culture.[41]

Underdeveloped advocacy and public communications. Advocacy campaigns for more advantageous charter policies necessitate a strong presence at the local, state, and national levels, as well as coordination among the organizations involved. Survey respondents expressed concern that such coordination was lacking.

Some respondents called for NAPCS (or another national charter advocacy organization) to focus intently on building consensus among state-level organizations and amplifying their collective concerns on Capitol Hill. In this way, one organization would serve as the national voice of the movement—a role many see NAPCS currently playing. Others argued that the most important function of a national charter advocacy organization is to bolster state-level organizations, since many of these groups are underfunded and yet represent the last line of defense against state-level legislative attack. A key challenge facing the sector is to achieve consensus around which organization (or organizations) is best situated to play each of these important roles, and then to channel increased funding to their efforts.

Respondents generally agreed on the need for more positive charter school public relations. Among the concerns raised in survey responses: there has not been enough messaging that differentiates excellent charters from failing ones; there have been too few success stories shared; and there have been too few attempts to counter popular myths about the sector, such as that charter schools charge tuition or can be religious schools. These are difficult problems to address—public relations and communications strategies are time-consuming and expensive, and their effectiveness is not guaranteed.

The sector also needs a larger base of state and local political support for high-quality chartering. Legislatures and state governments still have too few champions of a quality sector. Parents of charter school students have not been educated about the importance of activism on behalf of charters or recruited in sufficient numbers to join state and local advocacy efforts.[42] In short, the sector has not done enough to rally those most necessary to its advancement in size and quality.

Resulting Imperatives

Renewing the Compact set forth principles and recommendations that aimed to achieve progress in the areas of student achievement, talent, funding, support, and scale. As this summary has explained, the sector has made significant progress in these areas, but much important work remains. The following section provides bold recommendations for the sector's future. These recommendations will help capitalize on successes achieved to date while confronting persistent challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS: BOLD ACTIONS FOR BUILDING A BREAKTHROUGH SECTOR AND CREATING A RESULTS-DRIVEN CULTURE

The charter sector faces daunting, persistent challenges, frustrating many of the experts consulted for this report. But those experts had plenty of ideas about the way forward.

The bold actions that follow are organized according to the two broad needs identified most often in the literature and by interviewees and survey respondents: 1) the need to **build a breakthrough charter sector** by capitalizing on its capacity for innovation and its ability to scale up successes; and 2) the need to **create a results-driven culture** across the charter sector.

The first two actions listed under **building a breakthrough charter sector** represent a potentially

game-changing new direction for the sector: make the charter sector the source of innovative solutions to public education's most pressing challenges, and focus advocacy efforts on building broad support for the sector to take on these challenges. Several interviewees expressed optimism that these actions would usher in sweeping changes to the sector and pave the way for successfully meeting the needs of far more students and families. The other actions described under this recommendation refer to additional ways to propel the sector forward, including increasing the supply of excellent new charter schools by attracting and supporting talented leaders, and the need to turbo-charge growth of the highest-performing charter schools.

The second set of actions would **create a results-driven culture** across the charter sector. The sector has in recent years "talked a good game" on focusing on quality, but many leaders interviewed and surveyed for this report flagged shortcomings in the sector's approach to quality. These actions *demand accountability* for performance and increase the sector's role in *creating and improving standards* and the means of effectively measuring progress against them.

Each of the actions includes several specific recommendations for the sector—recommendations which were informed by research as well as the insights of 67 sector leaders (interviewees and survey respondents).[43] The recommendations are followed by suggestions of which stakeholders are best positioned to move them forward. As with *Renewing the Compact* in 2005, the actions and recommendations aim to foster the goals of growth and quality simultaneously. What sets these 2012 recommendations apart is a call to innovate with greater urgency, and to increase the sector's influence and impact on U.S. education reform.

Bold Actions for Building a Breakthrough Sector and Creating a Results-Driven Culture

Building a Breakthrough Sector	
1.	**Make the charter sector the source of innovative solutions to public education's most pressing challenges.** Provide opportunities and new incentives for break-the-mold school models that address a wider variety of student and school needs.
2.	**Focus advocacy efforts on building broad support for a high-quality charter sector that can solve public education's most pressing challenges.** Advocate more forcefully and strategically for state policy changes in key areas of charter operations, and make a concerted effort to unite charter supporters in common policy battles at the federal and state levels.
3.	**Increase the supply of excellent new charter schools.** Attract and support talented people to open, lead, and govern high-performing charter schools.
4.	**Turbo-charge the growth of the highest-performing charter schools**. Create policies and practices that build the supply of high-quality seats by scaling up success much more quickly.
Creating a Results-Driven Culture	
5.	**Hold authorizers accountable for outcomes.** Shine a light on authorizers that charter or fail to intervene in low-performing schools.
6.	**Make the charter sector the cutting edge of defining "success" and operating with transparency.** Use charter schools as laboratories for determining what constitutes success and how to measure it.
7.	**Close or intervene in persistently low-performing schools.** Enact automatic closure provisions and push authorizers to act in the face of true failure.

Building a Breakthrough Sector

The first 20 years of the charter sector's existence saw a new form of school governance take root in states across the country, with resulting breakthrough successes in high-performing schools, especially so-called "no excuses" schools serving high-poverty, urban student populations. Now, the sector needs to take those successes to scale, both by growing existing successful approaches and by creating the next wave of great schools. An ambitious goal would help: For example, in the next decade, the sector should aim to create 1 million new "seats" as good as the top 10 percent of today's charter schools. And as it scales up, the sector should also aim to "scale wide," innovating to address a more diverse range of student and school challenges than it does now.

Action 1. Make the charter sector the source of innovative solutions to public education's most pressing challenges.

The charter sector has spawned cutting-edge approaches to some of the most vexing issues in public education. It has drawn on a wide variety of support organizations to help develop new approaches to funding, classroom instruction, and school operations. The sector itself is a dramatic innovation, setting up a new kind of relationship between oversight bodies and schools. But dramatic, breakthrough innovations have been too few and too limited in overall impact. Operators, authorizers, and policymakers all need to be bolder in designing promising break-the-mold school models and breaking down barriers to their implementation, so charter schools can expand their role in producing solutions to America's biggest education challenges.

Innovations in addressing public education's toughest practical challenges and in reaching the most underserved student populations could dramatically affect the sector. Addressing education's toughest challenges encompasses areas such as staffing (including recruitment and retention), student funding, governance, STEM education, school turnarounds, and the effective use of technology to reshape classroom structures and teaching roles. Addressing the most underserved student populations requires moving beyond urban, low-income populations as the primary success story of the sector, to address a wider range, such as students with disabilities, students learning English, students in the juvenile justice system, rural students, and dropouts and students in need of credit recovery. Although examples of successful charter schools in these categories exist, the sector has not had as deep and wide an impact on these students as it has on the urban, low-income population.

High schools pose particular challenges for innovators. Rigid seat time and sequencing rules constrain the educational process at precisely the time in their careers when many students would benefit from increased scheduling flexibility and more numerous and diverse course alternatives.

Recommendations

- **Create incentives to increase innovation.** Just as the charter sector needs new means for drawing talented *individuals* into the sector (see below), it also must expand strategies for channeling promising new *ideas* into structuring and operating schools. Competitions that reward innovation directly with funding, recognition, or support can open channels for bold, new ideas to take root in new school creation. The Gates Foundation's Next Generation Learning Challenges provide an example of a competition open to (but not limited to) charters, designed to push the envelope on new approaches to school design. Actors across the charter sector can create incentives for existing and prospective operators to think deeply and intelligently about the fundamental building blocks of schools and how they might be reorganized to improve student learning outcomes. They can also provide incentives for operators to address public education's toughest practical challenges and serve broader ranges of students.
- **Empower authorizers to specialize in certain areas of innovation or to address the challenges of specific student populations.** In addition to standard authorizers, states should consider empowering differentiated authorizers to focus exclusively on particular types of schools.[44] For

example, an authorizer might only oversee schools with blended learning models, unique staffing and compensation plans, novel assessment systems, or specialized subject-matter focuses (e.g., STEM). Some authorizers might specialize in turnarounds, charter conversions, or replication of high-performing schools. And some might authorize only schools that serve specific challenging student populations that have previously been underserved, such as students with disabilities, students learning English, students in the juvenile justice system, students in rural areas, or those in need of credit or dropout recovery. This would permit authorizers to develop expertise in confronting a narrower set of challenges, and they would be well positioned to aid schools in identifying specialists in their focus area to serve as school leaders, board members, or teachers, or to provide school supports.

- **Remove seat-time and assessment barriers to innovating in charter schools.** Charter school operators should be able to propose, for authorizer approval, unique curricular approaches and timelines for meeting a set of state-mandated standards for promotion or high school graduation. Given the diverse needs and circumstances of many high school students, charter high schools, especially, should be exempt from seat-time and sequencing requirements, regulations tied to traditional grade-level designations (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), and assessments that are required to be taken on specific dates or at certain points in a student's school career. Dramatic changes like these will require significant supports from outside the schools, to design reliable assessments in core subjects that can be taken on demand and used across schools to show student competency (or "mastery").

How can critical stakeholders make the charter sector the source of innovative solutions to public education's most pressing challenges?

- **State charter associations and national advocacy organizations can:**
  - document and publicize innovative charter successes, and examples of charter schools addressing public education's most vexing problems.
  - push for the creation of specialized authorizers and the elimination of barriers preventing dramatically different approaches to charter high schools.
- **Authorizers can:**
  - design application criteria, set competitive priorities, or issue separate RFPs to incentivize innovation by charter applicants.
  - support innovation through expertise in specific areas or with particular student populations (for differentiated authorizers).
  - open high schools to innovation by helping schools secure needed autonomies and move away from seat-time and other barriers to innovation.
- **Private funders can:**
  - support research to determine which innovative practices work.
  - publicize and scale up the most effective models.
  - create competitions, offer prizes, and otherwise encourage the creation and implementation of dramatic, thoughtful ideas for new charter schools.
- **Policymakers can:**
  - create differentiated authorizers or empower authorizers to specialize in specific areas or meet the needs of particular student populations.
  - grant charter schools, particularly high schools, autonomy to take dramatically different approaches to prepare students for graduation.

Action 2. Focus advocacy efforts on building broad support for a high-quality charter sector that solves public education's most pressing challenges.

In the early years of the charter movement, sector leaders were willing to bargain away crucial supports simply to win the right for charters to exist.[45] As *Renewing the Compact* put it: "In our quest for independence, [the sector] accepted laws that left gaping holes in the fabric of financial support, or that allowed districts to create charters-in-name-only, tethered to outmoded work rules and somnolent central-office services."[46] In many states, these original laws have meant that charter schools have been battling ever since to secure the policy environment that will allow them to thrive. Though individual states have begun to win some of these policy battles—especially around lifting arbitrary caps on growth—unequal funding, lack of access to facilities, and an absence of autonomies remain far too prevalent throughout the sector.

The battle for policies that support a strong, quality-focused, and creative charter sector cannot merely be waged by disparate local groups. Charter policy is set at the state and federal level. Thus, it is in every charter advocacy organization's best interests to reach across jurisdictional lines and coordinate a strong, unified message. And they need to unite with all those who favor an excellent charter sector, focused on solving public education's most pressing challenges, to support a quality-focused agenda. State-level charter associations could do more to communicate with other state reform organizations, such as the state branches of 50CAN, Stand for Children, and Students First, or to share best practices with sister state associations. Addressing the most underserved student populations requires moving beyond urban, low-income populations as the primary success story of the sector, to address a wider range, such as students with disabilities, students learning English, students in the juvenile justice system, rural students, and dropouts and students in need of credit recovery. Although examples of successful charter schools in these categories exist, the sector has not had as deep and wide an impact on these students as it has on the urban, low-income population.

Too many advocacy organizations were pegged by interviewees and survey respondents as advocating "for the sector" rather than advocating for a *high-quality* sector that produces solutions to America's biggest education challenges. One interviewee described advocacy organizations as too often "member-driven" rather than "performance-driven."

Recommendations

- **Redouble efforts to pursue equitable funding**. Without equitable public funding, many existing, successful charter models cannot be sustained in the long term. Equitable funding would lift a major barrier currently preventing a diversity of operators and new ideas from flourishing in many states. Charter supporters must be dogged in their pursuit of equitable funding, using every opportunity to highlight inequities and resisting "bargains" that ask them to do more with less. Pursuing equitable funding is especially challenging in these economic times but remains a central policy issue for the sector. Today, requests to policymakers for "new money" would likely fall on deaf ears, and proposals to shift dollars from districts to charters would likely provoke a louder response. Creative strategies, like tying new facilities funding or increased operating dollars to results, or to reaching more students with great charter schools, could prove more persuasive.
- **Push for actual access to unused public facilities**. A few cities and districts have expanded access to public school buildings by codifying a right of first refusal to lease or purchase them; others have extended low- or no-cost leasing privileges to charter schools. Some states "require" districts to take such steps, but in reality these provisions have not compelled many unwilling districts to make vacant space available to charter schools. States should continue to amplify the potency of these mandates, requiring districts to: post inventories of vacant and underused facilities;

give charter schools the first opportunity to lease them; be transparent and evenhanded throughout the process; and be subject to state audits to determine if they are truly making all possible space available.[47] In places with significant amounts of vacant and underused space that districts are not voluntarily making available to charter schools, policymakers should consider turning facilities ownership over to an impartial public authority, which can then lease space to district and charter operators as needed.

- **Pursue the next generation of facilities financing policies.** Federal credit enhancement funds, philanthropic efforts, and access to tax-exempt conduit financing have helped some charter schools obtain affordable facilities financing, but facilities still remain far too great a financial drain, and sometimes an outright blockade, for charter schools. They need bolder policies. Early-stage charter schools will always be risky for lenders, so credit enhancement strategies must be expanded, with both public and private funds on the line. As charter schools prove their value to students, they should gain access to the kind of financing districts typically enjoy: bonds backed by the full faith and credit of the public or, if that is not an option, the "moral obligation" of the state to repay their bonds.

- **Preserve and strengthen charter school autonomies**. In order for charter schools to meet higher standards than their district school counterparts—especially when so many charters remain at significant financial disadvantages—they must be allowed the autonomy to craft their own academic strategies for success. Charter advocates should strategize on a regular basis to maintain and expand autonomies in finance, personnel, scheduling, curriculum, and instruction.[48]

- **Update the charter model law**. NAPCS's model charter law is widely cited by sector experts as a major advance in the charter sector's ongoing quest for supportive policies. Maine's new charter law closely tracks the model law. In the past few years, states including Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, New Mexico, Hawaii, and North Carolina have all substantially overhauled their laws to align with NAPCS's model law. Legislative leaders must continue to perceive the model law as relevant when seeking to improve existing charter laws or promulgate new ones. To that end, NAPCS should integrate new provisions in line with the sector's evolution over the past several years, and with the policy components of bold new priorities for the sector, such as those contained throughout this report.

- **Provide sufficient funding for a national organization to serve as the go-to national voice for the charter sector to drive a quality-focused agenda in matters of federal policy**. A wide array of funders should provide adequate support for NAPCS's effort to speak with a national voice for an excellence-focused charter sector, and mobilize state, local, and other national organizations that share that mission. Working in coalition with groups like for-profit operators and large CMOs, who have more resources and who can directly lobby, could be advantageous but could also generate significant tensions when coalition members have disparate interests or focus on growth irrespective of quality. Funders for NAPCS and other quality-oriented organizations therefore need to ensure that these organizations can advocate for quality-focused policies, even if other well-funded segments of the charter sector may not agree. NAPCS is well positioned to continue in a strong federal advocacy role, to build on recent federal policy successes, and to keep federal policymakers focused on what will foster high-quality, accountable chartering.

- **Provide more support to state-level organizations to enable their unrelenting focus on quality**. Some sector leaders think that national charter organizations should address policy issues at the federal level, leaving state organizations solely in charge of state-level efforts. However, many smaller state organizations lack the capacity to do more than stave off legislative attacks. For

the charter sector to grow and simultaneously increase excellence, every state needs a strong state-based organization that can successfully press a quality-oriented charter agenda, requiring proactive efforts—offense as well as defense. Such a strategy necessitates stronger and better-funded state organizations.

State-level organizations need not reinvent the wheel or duplicate efforts in other states. National organizations such as NAPCS could play a much more active role not just in building state capacity, but in actually *providing* capacity. These organizations could carry out more work that directly helps state-level efforts, such as: developing issue-oriented, research-based advocacy materials focused on quality; setting up the infrastructure for database-driven communications efforts; conducting market research on messages that resonate with different audiences; and even providing short-term adjunct staff in places where key advocacy moments require more boots on the ground. Since national organizations will inevitably have limited resources to commit to state work, they should ration it by providing the most support to state efforts that are focused on building a high-quality sector.

- **Grow a network of advocates for a high-quality charter sector within every level of federal and state government**. In any advocacy campaign, one key step is to reach out to legislators. However, hundreds more government officials exert influence over K–12 education policy. Continuing to deliberately cultivate relationships with a wide range of key influencers—education advisors to the president, the secretary of education, governors, and chief state school officers, for example, as well as congressional staffers, sub-cabinet officers at the U.S. Department of Education, local boards of education, and other key players—could pay huge dividends in the long run in focusing discussions on how to make the charter sector the source of innovative solutions to public education's most pressing challenges.[49]

  In addition, charter organizations should work to fill government job openings with candidates who stand for quality-focused charter sector growth. By keeping track of these job openings within a searchable database, and keeping tabs on job candidates who are proven champions of the charter sector, a funder or organization could make deep inroads into the K–12 bureaucracy.

- **Grow a network of advocates for a high-quality charter sector within communities**. Beyond cultivating relationships with government officials, building a constituent base that will apply external pressure in favor of a high-quality charter sector is a worthwhile goal. Even so, past full-blown PR campaigns targeting the public have been expensive and only marginally effective. Advocacy organizations should instead target communications efforts toward an oft-neglected group: the parents of charter school students. Charter parents and students can put a face on the charter movement through their personal stories. Parents can also represent the constituent voice for legislators, and even if they disagree, legislators are likely to listen because parent opinions may translate into actual votes.

  The expansion of charter schools into new geographies and student populations that address a range of challenges could similarly grow the base of parent support. As long as the public face of the charter sector remains so predominantly the "no excuses" model that serves urban, low-income students, parents and community members elsewhere have little reason to become invested. In the words of one interviewee, the charter sector has become something of a boutique, rather than a shopping mall full of educational choices, and as long as that is the case, the charter movement risks remaining on the margins of public understanding and support.

How can critical stakeholders advocate to build broad support for a high-quality sector with the capacity to solve public education's most pressing challenges?

- **National advocacy organizations can:**
  - reframe the public debate about the purpose of the sector by stressing its ability to solve public education's most pressing challenges.
  - push unceasingly for increased access to funding and facilities, and for increased operational autonomy for charter school leaders.
  - resist policy "bargains" that will require charter schools to do more with less.
  - direct their assistance to state charter organizations and state-level efforts focused on excellence.
  - work to maximize the extent to which federal and state funds are directed to quality-focused activities.
  - build state-level capacity and in some cases actually *provide* state-level capacity.
- **Leaders of high-performing charter schools and CMOs can:**
  - communicate frequently with supportive policymakers about the difficulties they encounter in maintaining excellence in the face of problematic policies.
  - encourage parents and community members to vocally support their schools and the sector as a whole.
- **State-level advocates and charter and CMO leaders can:**
  - shun growth strategies not tied to quality.
  - build support for quality among charter school parents.
  - expand into new geographies and new student populations to encourage buy-in from a new base of supporters.
- **Private funders can:**
  - offer low-interest loans in greater volume to fledgling charter schools.
  - extend increased funding specifically for charter schools' capital investments.
  - increase funding for national advocacy and coalition-building focused on quality.
  - support state organizations, particularly in states with smaller charter markets, that feel pressure to expand their states' sectors or their own membership without strong regard for the need to build a quality-focused sector.
- **Policymakers can:**
  - continue to work across the aisles to support charter schools by emphasizing their role in solving public education's most pressing challenges.
  - resist compromise on the core issues of equitable funding, access to facilities, and ensuring charter autonomy.
  - increase access to a wide range of financing alternatives for charter schools.

Action 3. Increase the supply of excellent new charter schools.

A great strength of the charter sector has been its ability to attract a new generation of talented people into public education. Yet the sector is not creating excellent new schools quickly enough to meet the challenge of educating today's many underserved students. As the sector grows, it will need to attract even more talented people and prepare them to open, lead, govern, and teach in high-performing charter schools.

Recommendations

- **Seed charter incubators to serve every major U.S. city that has a charter sector.** Charter incubators intentionally build the supply of high-quality charter schools and CMOs. They recruit leaders who show exceptional promise, and they train and support them as they prepare to open and lead new schools.[50] They share a belief that "new school founders who are carefully vetted and receive critical supports are more likely to be successful, on average, than those who start new schools on their own."[51] Established and emerging incubators such as the Tennessee Charter School Incubator, New Schools for New Orleans, Charter School Partners, Get Smart Schools, and The Mind Trust's Charter School Incubator have provided early indications that investing in incubation can help dramatically increase the supply of talented leaders who are prepared to operate high-quality charter schools. Unfortunately, too few localities have organizations actively engaged in incubation at a sufficient scale.

- **Develop specialized incubators to address the leadership challenges of operating innovative school models or serving unique student populations.** To date, incubators have tended to be city-based and have geared recruitment toward promising leaders without regard to the specific types of charter school they would open. In addition to expanding these initiatives, the sector would benefit from new incubators tailored to specific models or student populations. For example, although it would be impractical to start an incubator for every rural area where chartering might take root, statewide, regional, or national incubators could focus on recruiting and selecting talented individuals and preparing them to face the specific challenges of opening and leading high-performing charter schools in rural areas. Other areas where specialized incubators could have a strong impact on sector leadership include: schools designed to succeed with underserved populations such as students with disabilities, students learning English, and students in the juvenile justice system; technology-rich school models; and models built specifically to confront the long-term difficulty of achieving financial sustainability. See Action 2 for more discussion of the specific challenges that incubation might usefully address.

- **Expand the amount and types of funding for incubation and other efforts to boost the supply of exceptional founder-leaders.** Incubation offers a high potential return on investment for funders. Costs range from $200,000 to $500,000 per school and are a one-time investment. By contrast, other reform strategies may require millions of dollars per school and require sustained investment over many years. In addition to private funding, efforts are under way to open channels for public dollars to support incubation.[52] The impact of incubation may be enhanced by efforts to recruit promising new school leaders from across education and from other sectors.

- **Initiate student loan reimbursement programs for charter school alumni who return as teachers or leaders.** One way to help the charter sector continue to attract strong teachers and leaders as it grows is partial student loan reimbursement programs for the alumni of excellent charter schools—alumni whose experiences presumably provided a deep understanding of what elements a great charter school should possess. This could be a charter-specific program, or one designed more broadly to fuel the pipeline of teachers into high-needs schools. Alumni who return to charters

as teachers would receive a certain percentage of loan reimbursement; those who remain longer and move into advanced roles or leadership positions could earn back the full amount of their student loan obligation.

- **Recruit, train, and support board members for the challenges of overseeing charter schools and holding them accountable for student learning outcomes.** The *Renewing the Compact* recommendations on charter boards remain important in 2012: The sector needs to recruit a deep bench of potential charter board members to fill needs as the sector expands. There should be a nonnegotiable set of core skills that board members (or boards as a whole) must meet, and a long-term leadership development plan that helps maintain continuity as board membership changes. Board members need training and support to understand and fulfill their responsibilities, and they also need access to data on the schools they oversee that will facilitate their work.[53] Finally, governing boards of charter schools that demonstrate high student achievement should be permitted to oversee multiple schools or campuses.
- **Create jobs and career paths to make teaching and school leadership attractive long-term options for talented people.** Although individual charter schools and charter networks have experimented with new talent strategies, the sector as a whole has not shown enough leadership in this area. Several strategies commonly used in other sectors could help make the charter sector even more of a talent magnet, including creating career ladder opportunities for advanced roles within teaching, extending the reach of excellent performers, and paying teachers more for reaching more students or for taking on more demanding roles.[54]

How can critical stakeholders increase the supply of excellent new charter schools?

- **State charter associations and national advocacy organizations can:**
  - lead efforts to identify and support a diverse array of promising organizations and individuals to lead incubation efforts.
  - help prepare charter board members to understand and fulfill their responsibilities, emphasizing their accountability for student learning outcomes.
- **Leaders of high-performing charter schools and CMOs can:**
  - create incubation initiatives (such as KIPP's Fisher Fellows or the E.L. Haynes Public Charter School).
  - build new school and staffing models that make the profession more attractive and rewarding for talented individuals (**authorizers** should provide incentives for them to do so).
  - initiate student loan reimbursement programs for the alumni of high-performing charter schools.
  - share their best selection, development, and evaluation practices with other CMOs and incubators.
- **Private funders can:**
  - support incubation, including the creation of specialized leadership incubators.
  - fund initiatives that draw talented individuals to the sector from elsewhere in education or from other sectors.
  - provide seed capital for tuition reimbursement programs.
- **Policymakers can:**
  - dedicate public funding to incubation.
  - grant charters autonomy to pioneer staffing innovations.
  - permit single boards to oversee multiple charter schools or campuses.

Action 4. Turbo-charge the growth of the highest-performing charter schools.

Positive proof points abound within the charter sector. Yet numerous barriers to growth confront the best charter schools, not the least of which is a fear of expansion that exists across the sector. Even those who want to grow often face practical, policy, and sector barriers.[55] Charter supporters need to confront the challenges of growing the sector's best to rapidly and effectively meet the massive need for high-quality charter seats across the country.

Recommendations

- **Reward growth accompanied by excellence.** It is no secret how difficult it is to grow while maintaining excellent outcomes. Those who succeed should reap rewards that accrue both to the organization (in part to encourage further growth) and also to the individual CMO or school leaders and staff who took on the challenge of growth and made it work. Rewarding high performers also fuels investment in systems and talent pipelines that enable further growth. In 2011, Public Impact proposed a new formula for measuring growth and excellence: Charter School Success = Student Outcomes X Annual Number of Students Reached.[56] Schools and networks should be encouraged to commit to this formula as a key performance measure. Charter authorizers and operators should also develop appropriate performance-based funding measures that reward excellence and reach.
- **Invest in the next big charter brands.** Typically, new charter operators and authorizers focus on achieving excellence in one school before entertaining serious thoughts of expansion. After individual schools have demonstrated excellence, they should be encouraged to consider expanding their impact to more students or more schools, and assisted in developing thoughtful plans and systems in anticipation of growth.
- **Build leadership and talent pipelines to support growth.** A rapid scale-up of successful school models will require major infusions of leadership and teaching talent that are likely to quickly exhaust internal talent pipelines. Growth leaders should consider recruiting operational experts skilled at confronting the challenges of growth, which might include experienced educators but might also involve importing leaders from other sectors with proven track records, training them to succeed in education, and helping them develop teams to address gaps in their skills or knowledge. Additionally, as discussed above, charter schools should create jobs and career paths to make teaching and school leadership attractive long-term options for the most talented people, which will improve recruitment and retention to support growth.
- **Develop communities of growth-oriented charters and networks to confront common challenges and create a culture that values growth.** Partnerships and alliances among those invested in quality growth will enable charter schools and networks to share successful approaches to growth, collectively overcome growth barriers, and unite to advocate for policy changes to facilitate growth with excellence.

How can critical stakeholders turbo-charge the growth of the highest-performing charter schools?

- **State charter associations and national advocacy organizations can:**
  - better understand impediments to quality growth and work to alleviate them.
  - encourage successful charters to grow, and facilitate their growth planning.
  - facilitate partnerships and alliances among operators and supporters to confront growth barriers, or advocate for changes in policies that inhibit growth.
- **Authorizers can:**
  - create some measures of school success that include both excellence *and* growth, while recognizing that not all schools plan to replicate.
  - encourage successful schools to consider growth.
  - design charter contracts and policies to reward excellence financially or through streamlined processes for renewal, replication, or the granting of additional charters.
- **Charter and CMO leaders can:**
  - plan intentionally for growth after achieving excellence with their first schools.
  - negotiate with authorizers for charter contracts that reward growth with excellence, both for the organization and for individual teachers and leaders.
- **Private funders can:**
  - seed the creation of new charter organizations that begin with growth in mind.
  - facilitate replication planning by successful operators.
  - fund support organizations that help excellent operators confront and manage the challenges of quality growth.
- **Policymakers can:**
  - craft policy agendas to include measures of charter success that includes both growth and excellence, without penalizing schools that opt not to grow.
  - eliminate policies that limit growth of high-performing charter schools.
  - build performance incentives into state charter funding laws.

Creating a Results-Driven Culture

The four actions in the preceding section will lead to the creation of new charter schools with the incentive and ability to grow and innovate. But after schools open, operators, authorizers, and others need to put plans into action that will ensure improved student learning outcomes and other positive impacts on students and the overall education system. Specific actions to accomplish this include: holding authorizers accountable for outcomes; making the charter sector the cutting edge of defining "success" and operating with transparency; and closing or intervening in persistently low-performing schools.

Action 5. Hold authorizers accountable for outcomes.

The sector has made commendable progress in recent years in refining principles and standards for quality authorizing, led by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA).[57] To develop these standards, NACSA distilled a wide range of practice-based wisdom into a set of actionable strategies that can guide authorizers as they set policies and carry out their daily work.[58]

With these vital standards identified, the sector should prioritize efforts to hold authorizers accountable for meeting basic responsibilities. At the same time, sector leaders must acknowledge and confront a major tension in authorizing—the extent to which overreliance on standards and established best practices could stifle innovation.

Recommendations

- **Spotlight authorizer practices and outcomes to encourage compliance with established standards.** In the words of a time-tested adage, "sunlight is the best disinfectant."[59] Authorizers should be subject to scrutiny through enhanced transparency requirements in their practices, and with respect to their schools' outcomes. Such openness would assist schools in choosing authorizers to best serve their needs and place pressure on authorizers that fail to fulfill their duties. Scrutiny should come through case studies, the maintenance of databases that allow easy comparisons of practices and outcomes across authorizers, and public recognition of strong examples of good authorizing and problematic practices. Authorizer report cards that measure fidelity to established standards, academic performance, and information about school closures would also enhance this scrutiny.
- **Insist on real consequences for underperforming schools, including closure when necessary.** Authorizers must hold charters to the requirements embodied in federal and state law, authorizers' own internal standards, and the terms of individual charter contracts. Authorizers should be pressured by actors throughout the sector to establish and maintain clear performance measures for the schools they charter. They should be encouraged to define objective measures before they charter schools, to avoid controversy about unclear requirements or fuzzy standards.
- **Create space for authorizers to take risks and authorize innovation.** While the development of standards for "good authorizing" are a positive development in the sector overall, they should not be immutable or so inflexible as to discourage unproven but reasoned authorizing practices. As with school accountability (discussed below), there should be room for authorizers to take reasonable risks to authorize innovative schools, including those with new models and practices, and those that take on particularly challenging student populations.

How can critical stakeholders improve authorizer accountability for outcomes?
• **State charter associations and national advocacy organizations can:** ◦ encourage maintenance of databases on authorizer practices and performance. ◦ create or support report cards, case studies, and other publications that scrutinize authorizer practices and highlight best practices. ◦ encourage policies and practices that hold authorizers accountable but also leave room for them to take risks on innovative but unproven models and practices, and on schools that take on challenging student populations.
• **Private funders can:** ◦ condition authorizer funding on compliance with NACSA standards. ◦ invest in the development of databases, reports, case studies, and other resources that scrutinize authorizer approaches and highlight best practices.
• **Policymakers can:** ◦ perform audits on authorizers to ensure compliance with federal and state law. ◦ require the publication of information on state authorizer practices and results, including data on schools' academic performance and closure rates. ◦ mandate the public dissemination of charter school data and charter agreements to encourage and facilitate public scrutiny.

Action 6. Make the charter sector the cutting edge of defining "success" and operating with transparency.

Interviewees and survey respondents praised sector leaders for instigating a "drumbeat for quality," which they recognized as having become steadier and more intense since the release of *Renewing the Compact*.

Most sector leaders define a quality school as one that achieves excellent student learning outcomes, most commonly measured by required end-of-grade tests. Yet some feel frustrated with the charter sector's inability to challenge the status quo on the outcomes measured (academic outcomes in core subjects) and the means for measuring them (multiple-choice standardized tests). Some expressed a desire to see charter schools more actively experiment with different types of assessments. Some pined for broader measurements, including student character traits, such as "zest, grit, self-control, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism and curiosity."[60] And some expressed hope that the sector would help move the broader field toward innovative methods for measuring success that go beyond standardized testing.

Recommendations

- **Use charter autonomy to pioneer new measures of student performance.** Charter schools should be encouraged to include additional and different means of student outcome assessment in their charter agreements and operational plans. Authorizers might require schools to propose new assessment measures, or make the inclusion of such measures a competitive priority. Researchers and advocates can help with the creation of such measures, and shine a light on them as they are implemented, to help determine what works and expand successful measures to other schools, or even use the results to influence changes in statewide assessment.

  New measures are especially important in schools serving nontraditional students, for whom schools need to establish rigorous expectations defined according to their students' unique circumstances.

Even as charters experiment with new methods for measuring student success, they must continue to focus on achieving excellent results according to established measures of student outcomes, including state-mandated assessments. In this way they can continue to build credibility as beacons of excellence and leverage their strong reputations to influence systemic changes in performance measurement and other policy areas.

- **Increase transparency around data, enrollment, and demographics.** As one interviewee for this report noted, "the fundamental challenge [for the sector] is that charter schools really aren't any one thing, and the movement has acted as if they are." This means that even though a subset of extraordinary charters shows great results, detractors still succeed in relying on arguments built on average performance across the sector, generalizing from a minority of bad actors, or targeting categories of schools (such as for-profit EMOs or full-time online schools) that make easy political targets due to their structure or results achieved to date. Charter advocates and funders should seek to disaggregate charter sector data so that more is known about the performance of certain kinds of charters, resulting in useful comparisons across the sector and with district schools.

  In particular, charter sector stakeholders should be transparent about where students start and where they end up, allowing for growth measures that are a better gauge of the impact of school-based factors than achievement measures alone. This is particularly important to encourage charter schools to address the most challenging and needy students, and to be open and transparent about their successes and struggles.

How can critical stakeholders make the charter sector the cutting edge of defining "success" and operating with transparency?

- **State charter associations and national advocacy organizations can:**
  - disaggregate charter sector data and publicize successes (and struggles) of certain types of charters, or charters in certain policy environments, rather than average statewide or sector-wide results.
  - focus on student growth as the most meaningful measure of school success.
- **Leaders of high-performing charter schools and CMOs can:**
  - work with authorizers to include new measures of student performance in charter agreements and operational plans.
  - maintain a strong focus on high performance on established measures of student outcomes, including state-mandated assessments.
  - share data on student growth and performance.
- **Authorizers can:**
  - encourage the inclusion of new measures of student performance in charter agreements and operational plans, and make including such measures a competitive priority in charter applications.
  - prioritize student growth over time, instead of just snapshots of student achievement, in accountability plans.
  - consider which student populations are being served when establishing performance expectations.
- **Private funders and researchers can:**
  - Help create new measures of success, evaluate what works, and advocate for expansion of successful measures.

Action 7. Close or intervene in persistently low-performing schools.

Closing or intervening in a failing or struggling charter school is never easy. Parents and children become invested in their schools, even unsuccessful ones, and often do not want them to close in spite of low performance. Closures disrupt families and communities, and usually involve laying off teachers and principals. Even so, greater harm is done to children by permitting failing schools to remain open indefinitely.

Nearly every charter leader interviewed for this report cited the lack of closures of low-performing schools to be the Achilles' heel of the sector. According to a 2010 report, 72 percent of low-performing charter schools in 10 states were allowed to remain open, and remained low-performing, for five years.[61] Closures would open slots under caps for potentially higher-performing schools, and would help define the sector based on its strict approach to quality. Closing failing schools would provide a strong answer to charter critics who complain that the sector bends too strongly toward growth irrespective of quality.

Whether school closure is appropriate when the failing charter school is nonetheless performing better than nearby district schools troubled some interviewees and survey respondents. Finally, within the minority of charter operators, boards, or authorizers who have actually taken bold action to close schools, too few have been able to handle the process in a way that was sensitive to all stakeholders.

Recommendations

- **Enact automatic closure provisions in every state as a backstop for quality authorizing.** If authorizers will not close a school and/or if incentives fail to work, states need to be willing to step in instead. The most responsible policy—described in detail in NAPCS's model charter law—requires automatic closure for schools that fail to meet performance expectations as defined in their charters for some predefined number of years.[62] Authorizers should be able to override automatic closure if, in their judgment, keeping the school open is in the best interests of students and the public (e.g., because a new board and leadership has stepped in and the school is improving rapidly).
- **Fuel the supply of replacement schools for chronic low performers.** Authorizers or states could choose to assign failing schools to alternate operators, if ones were ready and available; the problem is that very few talented operators are waiting around for such opportunities to appear.[63] As noted above, the charter sector needs to build the supply of talented people prepared to open and operate excellent charter schools. Closure would be easier to manage, and the outcomes better for students, if strong replacement pipelines could be tapped to move students from failing schools to more promising alternatives. States could also consider incentivizing turnaround work for successful charter operators, providing a more palatable option than automatic closure.
- **Improve methods of closing schools to mitigate harmful effects to children and communities.** When, in 2004, a California for-profit education management company was forced to close more than 60 campuses, 10,000 students were left to search for new schools a mere month before classes began. Parents and communities were understandably outraged. California responded by adopting a memorandum of understanding template for authorizers, which provides an in-depth description of how to close a charter school.[64] Giving authorizers the tools and knowledge necessary to close schools as painlessly as possible is an excellent way to support them through a difficult process, as well as to minimize negative effects on students and families.
- **Do a better job selecting and training board members.** According to a group of highly regarded authorizers, failing charter schools can be effectively turned around by a talented, well-connected, and politically savvy board.[65] Excellent boards can also bolster fundraising efforts, build community support, and foster the kind of operational excellence that allows schools to thrive. However, little has changed since 2005,

How can critical stakeholders facilitate closure or intervention in persistently low-performing schools?

- **State charter associations and national advocacy organizations can:**
  - share best practices among authorizers to facilitate responsible closure decisions and successful management of the closure process.
  - facilitate selection and training of high-quality charter board members.
- **Authorizers can:**
  - create clear, objective, and reasonable expectations of authorized schools.
  - communicate with school leaders and members of school communities over time to minimize the surprise of intervention and closure decisions.
  - act decisively to intervene in or close persistently low-performing schools.
- **Private funders can:**
  - invest in organizations that are preparing leaders to open schools to replace closures or serve the same communities.
  - fund recruitment and training of excellent charter board members.
- **Policymakers can:**
  - require automatic closure (with an authorizer override provision) for schools that fail to meet performance expectations for a predefined number of years.
  - provide strong incentives and state support for turnarounds.
  - permit multiple charters to share one excellent board.

when *Renewing the Compact* first noted that far too few excellent board members were serving charter schools; a recent study found that boards are still predominantly unskilled and uninvolved.[66] *Renewing the Compact*'s recommendations that multiple charters share one excellent board, and that charters invest in orientations and continuing education for board members, remain quite relevant today.

CONCLUSION

The charter sector has made important progress in key areas highlighted in *Renewing the Compact*. Yet persistent challenges inhibit the sector's fulfillment of its full promise. This report has highlighted actions to capitalize on the sector's existing strengths and confront those challenges.

By boldly pursuing the recommendations set forth in this report, stakeholders can create the next wave of new charter schools to solve public education's most pressing challenges; advocate for policies that will create a sector defined by quality; scale up existing successful approaches; deepen real accountability for performance; and create and improve standards and the means of effectively measuring progress against them.

As it was when *Renewing the Compact* was released in 2005, the charter sector is at a crossroads. Its successes are worth celebrating, and looking ahead, its promise is even greater. However, the sector will realize its promise only if leaders throughout the sector take bold steps to meet the challenges of growth and quality, to serve far more students with excellence.

APPENDIX I.
SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF QUALITY CHARTERING, FROM ORIGINAL *RENEWING THE COMPACT* POSITION STATEMENT

1. Quality is more important than quantity. Growth is not an end in itself.
2. The primary aim of charter schools is to pursue academic achievement for all students. Non-academic goals are important but do not by themselves justify charter renewal.
3. Charter schools must achieve at high levels—not just offering something marginally better than failing neighboring schools, but providing the kind of education that equips graduates for success in postsecondary education, fulfilling work in the 21st century economy, and responsible citizenship.
4. Charter accountability must be both internal and external. State mandated standardized tests are a necessary and appropriate condition of public accountability, but are not sufficient. Charter schools should embrace more frequent and expansive student assessment as a source of feedback that guides professional practice.
5. People make the difference. There is no foolproof "charter model" and a high priority must be placed on recruiting, mentoring, and evaluating those who lead and teach in charter schools.
6. Since charter schools are public schools, the students who attend them are entitled to the same level of financial support as students in other public schools.
7. Every kind of organization that supports or represents charter schools should be a force for quality, including authorizers, resource centers, state associations, lenders, and national advocacy groups.

APPENDIX II.
REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM ORIGINAL *RENEWING THE COMPACT* POSITION STATEMENT

- Let evidence drive operations.
- Embrace assessment.
- Spread effective practices.
- Build a high-quality, sustainable teacher force.
- Build high-quality, sustainable charter leadership.
- Develop the capacity of charter school boards of trustees.
- Strengthen authorizer competence and responsibility.
- Strengthen charter school accreditation.
- State associations must stand for quality.
- Fully fund charter schools.
- Public and private funders help bring quality to scale.
- Charter school laws must be about quality.

APPENDIX III. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Proposed Framework	*Renewing the Compact:* Principles*	Reflections and Recommendations*
***Student Achievement in Charter Schools*: Assessment and Excellence**	• Charter accountability must be both internal and external. State mandated standardized tests are a necessary and appropriate condition of public accountability, but are not sufficient. Charter schools should embrace more frequent and expansive student assessment as a source of feedback that guides professional practice. • The primary aim of charter schools is to pursue academic achievement for all students. Non-academic goals are important but do not by themselves justify charter renewal. • Charter schools must achieve at high levels—not just offering something marginally better than failing neighboring schools, but providing the kind of education that equips graduates for success in postsecondary education, fulfilling work in the 21st century economy, and responsible citizenship.	• Embrace assessment. • Let evidence drive operations. • Strengthen charter school accreditation.
***Talent*: Charter School Teachers, Principals, and Boards**	• People make the difference. There is no foolproof "charter model" and a high priority must be placed on recruiting, mentoring, and evaluating those who lead and teach in charter schools.	• Build a high-quality, sustainable teacher force. • Build high-quality, sustainable charter leadership. • Develop the capacity of charter school boards of trustees.
***Equitable Funding*: Operating and Facilities**	• Since charter schools are public schools, the students who attend them are entitled to the same level of financial support as students in other public schools.	• Fully fund charter schools.
***Conditions for Success*: Policy Environment, High-Quality Authorizing, Associations and other Supports**	• Every kind of organization that supports or represents charter schools should be a force for quality, including authorizers, resource centers, state associations, lenders, and national advocacy groups.	• Charter school laws must be about quality. • Strengthen authorizer competence and responsibility. • State associations must stand for quality. • Spread effective practices.
Advocacy and Communications		
Growth with Quality	• Quality is more important than quantity. Growth is not an end in itself.	• Public and private funders help bring quality to scale.

*Taken verbatim from *Renewing the Compact* (2005).

APPENDIX IV. LIST OF KEY SOURCES

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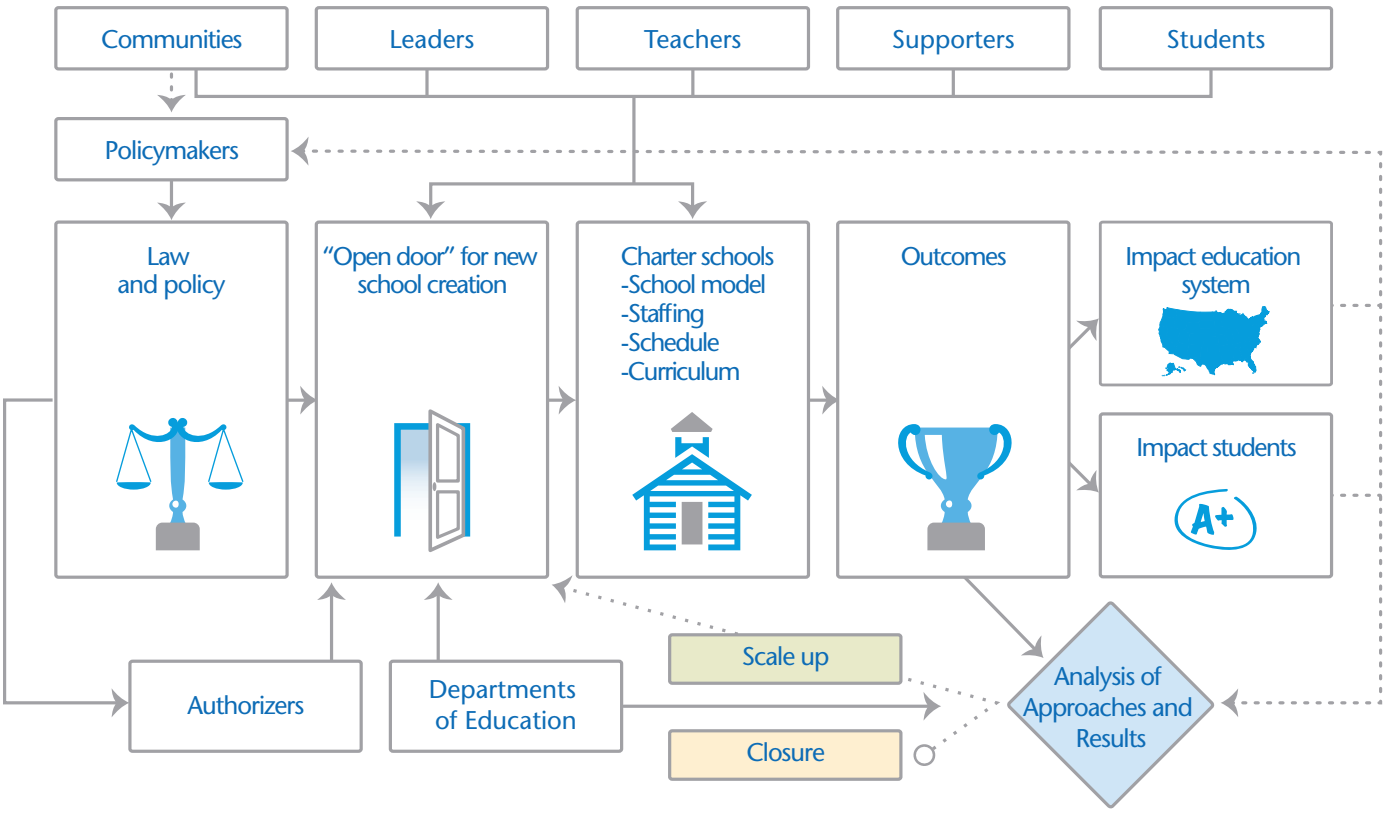
APPENDIX V.
LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

The following individuals generously provided expert opinion on the charter sector's progress and future direction. Their thoughts were invaluable to the authors' analysis and drafting of this report. The authors also collected survey responses from 48 education leaders, including representatives of charter schools, state charter support organizations, incubators, think tanks, advocacy groups, foundations, authorizers, and government agencies.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of any interviewee or survey respondent or his/her organization. All errors are the authors' alone.

- Mashea Ashton, Newark Charter School Fund
- David Domenici, Center for Educational Excellence in Alternative Settings
- Josh Edelman, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- Checker Finn, Thomas B. Fordham Institute
- Howard Fuller, Institute for the Transformation of Learning, Marquette University
- Alex Johnston, Bloomberg Philanthropies
- Ted Kolderie, Education | Evolving
- Robin Lake, Center on Reinventing Public Education
- Christopher Nelson, Doris & Donald Fisher Fund
- Eric Paisner, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
- James Peyser, NewSchools Venture Fund
- Macke Raymond, Hoover Institution
- Greg Richmond, National Association of Charter School Authorizers
- Jon Schnur, America Achieves
- Don Shalvey, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- Nelson Smith, Former President and CEO, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
- Jed Wallace, California Charter Schools Association
- Ursula Wright, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
- Todd Ziebarth, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
- Fernando Zulueta, Academica

APPENDIX VI.
HOW THE CHARTER SECTOR CAN TRANSFORM PUBLIC EDUCATION



EXPLANATION: Policymakers set ground rules for the sector, which are embodied in law and policy to do two things: (1) set the conditions under which new charter schools are created, and (2) empower a set of actors to determine who gets to open new schools and on what terms. Actors from several categories participate in the marketplace for new school creation: communities, prospective operators, those interested in school leadership or teaching positions in new schools, support groups (including incubators, state associations and non-public funders), and students. Communities also exert pressure on policymakers to change ground rules. Those who pass successfully through the "open door" for new school creation become new charter schools, which operate under additional rules affecting the school model, staffing, scheduling, curriculum, etc. Each school produces student outcomes and may affect the overall system by exporting best practices or inducing competitive responses from other schools (charter and district). These outcomes and impacts produce data on approaches and results that authorizers and government agencies analyze, possibly resulting in school closure (in case of failure), or the scale-up or replication of successes. Outcomes and impacts can also combine with public opinion to prompt policymakers to make changes in law and policy.

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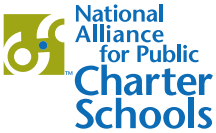

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