



# Charting New Territory

## Tapping Charter Schools to Turn Around The Nation's Dropout Factories

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Melissa Lazarin June 2011



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# Introduction and summary

Only a quarter of the class of 2008 graduated from Alain Locke Senior High School in Los Angeles after four years. This was unsurprising since nearly 60 percent of the class had left Locke by the end of their sophomore year.<sup>1</sup>

A majority of Locke teachers—frustrated with the school’s mediocrity—petitioned to allow charter management organization Green Dot Public Schools to transform the school. Locke reopened its doors in the fall with new landscaping, new teachers, a series of new small schools within the school, and new expectations. Two years into the transformation, a record 73 percent of sophomore students were still there at the end of the year.<sup>2</sup>

Green Dot Public Schools’s transformation of Locke is one of the most notable examples of a charter management organization, or CMO, turning around a chronically underperforming traditional public school. And the Obama administration would like to see more of it.

The president and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have set their sights on turning around the nation’s 5,000 lowest-performing schools, and they are hoping charter school operators will help shoulder part of the effort. But so far, school turnarounds in which a district engages a CMO to restart the school as a charter, as in the case of Locke, are relatively uncommon. Only 5 percent of schools, including 11 high schools, awarded a federal School Improvement Grant, or SIG, have chosen to restart as charter schools.<sup>3</sup>

Locke’s transformation stands out for reasons in addition to the district-charter partnership that supports the school’s turnaround. Green Dot’s revamping of Locke is particularly significant because it is a high school that persistently underperformed across all measurable metrics for years. Such high schools—“dropout factories” in which the incoming freshman class routinely shrinks by 40 percent or more four years later—are a chief target of the administration’s school turnaround program.<sup>4</sup>

It is unclear whether more struggling high schools will follow Locke's path and restart as charter high schools in an effort to improve their student outcomes. Many charter operators are comfortable with starting up new schools but are hesitant to enter the school turnaround space. In addition, schools and districts are more likely to choose other intervention strategies. States report that 74 percent of their SIG schools are implementing the transformation model, which requires the replacement of the school leader and new teacher evaluations but is generally considered to be the least disruptive of the turnaround options.<sup>5</sup>

The opportunities available to districts and high schools through the school improvement program have never been greater, however. The Obama administration and Congress have funded the program at unprecedented levels, and the highest proportion of school improvement dollars appears to be going toward high schools according to the U.S. Department of Education. The department's preliminary data suggests that 48 percent of the more than 700 schools awarded a 2010-2011 SIG grant are high schools.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover recent research suggests that charter high schools are demonstrating some significant promise. Students who attend a charter high school are 7 to 15 percentage points more likely to graduate and earn a high school diploma than are traditional public high school students according to a recent RAND report.<sup>7</sup>

This policy paper explores the role of charter schools in turning around the nation's lowest-performing high schools. Based on conversations with charter school operators, school district staff, researchers, and education reform experts, it examines how some pioneering cities—Los Angeles and Philadelphia in particular—are partnering with local charter operators to turn around some of their dropout factories and improve college readiness and graduation rates.

The paper explores barriers and opportunities for collaboration between charter management organizations and districts to turn around high schools. It finds that the extent to which districts have access to CMOs in their area, the degree of expertise that CMOs have in targeting secondary schools, and factors affecting the charter sector's growth all have some influence on the likelihood of success from these partnerships.

Charter high school operators—including those that have not yet engaged in turnaround work—and other experts discuss the unique considerations that come with operating a charter high school, and how these factors take shape when



the charter high school is a turnaround school. Charter staff share how they have adapted their educational approach to address district priorities, community expectations, and the needs of high school students who have been accustomed to an educational career in struggling schools. In general, charter operators are finding that the familiar principles that they have applied to their new school startups can still be used effectively in a turnaround school with some modifications.

The brief also summarizes early findings and perspectives on district-charter turnarounds offered by districts, charters, and others. Their recommendations and lessons learned are not meant to be comprehensive but they do offer valuable insight for districts, charter leaders, and policymakers interested in district-charter collaborations to turnaround schools.

For example, early collaborations between districts and charters suggest that both entities should define the parameters related to charter autonomy early in the partnership. Most charters find it necessary to have full authority over staffing, the school's budget, the school calendar, and curricular programming to be an effective school turnaround operator. In addition, other areas should be negotiated early on, such as common district concerns related to enrollment, discipline, and parent engagement.

District and state conditions can foster strong turnaround collaborations with charter operators. District leadership in bringing in nontraditional providers of teacher and school leader talent to staff up turnaround schools, and state assistance in developing performance contracts for district-charter partnerships can help fast-track district and charter partnerships to turnaround some of the most troubled schools.

It is not the intention of this paper to advocate for a particular turnaround model for high schools. States, districts, school leaders, parents, and other community stakeholders are better suited to decide which of the turnaround models outlined in the federal school improvement program are most appropriate for their school. Districts and charters that do partner to turn around high schools, however, may find the lessons learned from these early collaborations instructive.

# High school turnarounds: Are charters prepared for the challenge?

Turning around struggling schools is a challenging task for any school system. And by comparison, charters are still maturing as a sector and lack some of the capacity that traditional school systems have had decades to develop. Successful charter-led turnarounds of high schools will likely depend on the strength of CMOs, their degree of expertise and interest in secondary schools, and their ability to grow at scale necessary to support their engagement in both turnarounds and new charter start-ups.

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## A role for charter management organizations

Charter management organizations operate more than one charter school and may be better positioned than the single independent charter school to take over a low-performing school. CMOs are designed to help their campuses overcome common startup challenges—access to financial resources, human capital, and ensuring quality control.<sup>8</sup> In addition, they enjoy economies of scale and sharing of best practices that can often come with growing to scale.<sup>9</sup> This increased capacity may give CMOs a greater advantage over the single, independent charter school operator in managing a troubled turnaround school.

CMOs are rather small in size and operate approximately seven schools on average. They may never have the reach that some large urban districts have, but most plan to grow to a size that would include 10 to 35 schools in their network.<sup>10</sup>

Their smaller size can work in their favor with respect to turnarounds. A national survey of CMOs found that headquarter staff are frequently in their affiliated charter schools to meet with principals, conduct walk-throughs, and observe teachers. Sixty percent report meeting with their school principals on an either daily or weekly basis. In addition, CMOs prefer to give their schools a high degree of autonomy over teacher hiring and professional development but they are generally more prescriptive when it comes to developing the school's culture and how best to support struggling students.<sup>11</sup> This school management style may be particularly successful when approaching school turnarounds.

## CMOs: Opportunities and challenges

Geographically, there is an abundance of opportunity for CMOs to support high school turnaround efforts and help mitigate the dropout crisis. CMOs have a concentrated presence in many of the states and cities producing the nation's dropouts. Sixty-seven percent of all CMO-operated schools are in California, Texas, Arizona, Ohio, and Illinois—five of the 17 states producing almost 70 percent of the nation's dropouts.<sup>12</sup>

Dropout factories and CMO schools are both more likely to be located in cities, though some southern states, including Georgia and South Carolina, face the formidable challenge of tackling high dropout rates in their rural high schools. CMO-operated schools make up a significant share of charters in the large cities of Chicago, the District of Columbia, Houston, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and New York City, perhaps due in part for the need for innovative education reform in these areas.<sup>13</sup>

Chicago and New York City are particularly notable because the states' dropout crisis in both Illinois and New York can be mapped back to underperforming high schools in these cities.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Pennsylvania's dropout rates are heavily concentrated in Philadelphia high schools where at least one CMO—Mastery Charter School—is working with the school district to turn around middle and high schools.

Although district-charter collaborations in Los Angeles and Philadelphia are primarily highlighted in the following sections, some of the cities with a concentrated presence of CMOs and dropout factories are also engaging charter operators in various ways to replace their underperforming schools with a new generation of schools.

District of Columbia Public Schools former chancellor Michelle Rhee, for example, partnered with charter operators to manage three of the district's underperforming high schools. Chicago's 2010 Renaissance Initiative has engaged charters as well as other external organizations in its effort to establish 100 new schools, including several high schools, while closing chronically underperforming schools. And, New York City has phased out a number of underperforming schools while opening new traditional and public charter schools in their place. In addition, talks are underway between New York City administration officials, union leaders, and Green Dot Public Schools and Future is Now Schools Founder Steve Barr to employ a Locke-transformation approach for some district schools.<sup>15</sup>

Districts in these cities, therefore, are capitalizing on the availability of CMOs in their area. This paper will later take a closer look at district-charter collaborations in Los Angeles and Philadelphia.

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## Charter high schools are the last frontier

Only a handful of CMOs with a track record or expertise in secondary schools exist. As Betheny Gross, a researcher at the Center on Reinventing Public Education, or CRPE, at the University of Washington who has studied charter high schools observes, “Charter school people have not gone charging into high schools ... It’s the last place we’ve tried to reform.”<sup>16</sup>

The few CMOs that have entered the charter school development field with a focus on secondary schools include Green Dot Public Schools and the Alliance for College Ready Schools in Los Angeles, High Tech High in San Diego, and Mastery Charter Schools in Philadelphia. Altogether, a little over a third (38 percent) of CMO-operated schools serve high school students.<sup>17</sup> Sixteen percent of these schools are comparable to the traditional high school in that they focus exclusively on grades 9-12.

A substantial proportion of charters, however, serve secondary school students in combination with earlier grade levels. These schools are often the result of schools that may have started out as elementary or middle schools but due to parental and student demand or their approach to education, they have “grown out” to serve high school-aged students. Some of KIPP’s schools—the Knowledge Is Power Program network—are an example of this.

High Tech High’s network of schools began with a single school for high school students. “Impatience” was one reason High Tech High’s founders targeted the secondary school level, according to Chief Operations Officer Ben Daley. “If we start at the elementary school, we’re not going to see results for another 15 years,” Daley says.<sup>18</sup> High school-focused CMOs also pointed to the “urgent problem” of students not graduating ready for college and high schools being the “most broken” of schools in the K-12 education system as other reasons for targeting secondary school students.

While broken traditional high schools have led some charter entrepreneurs to try their hand, the challenge of high school reform is no less difficult in the charter environment. A national study of charter management organizations finds that many of the schools that CMOs report as “struggling” are secondary schools and that “CMO

leaders admit they are still figuring out their high school models.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, charter high schools are not immune to failure. One in 11 of the lowest-performing high schools are charter schools.<sup>20</sup>

These accounts are sobering, but they also point to a substantial knowledge gap in American education—how to operate effective, high-performing high schools. The autonomy afforded to charter schools can serve as a powerful tool in the national effort to improve American high schools. And while not all charter high schools are successful, some important lessons have been learned from the few CMOs that have gone “charging into high schools.” Those that have courageously gone beyond their niche and entered the turnaround space are even fewer in number but that makes their experiences all the more valuable.

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## Growing charters to scale

Scaling up high-performing charters to serve large numbers of students was a conundrum even before Secretary Duncan called on the charter sector to pitch in on school turnarounds. A recent Education Sector report enumerates many of the hurdles that need to be overcome—state charter school caps, authorization battles, inequitable funding compared to traditional public schools, financing facilities, an insufficient supply of teachers and leaders with the right mix of skills and stamina.<sup>21</sup> And, these are just a few of the barriers.

Should districts increasingly seek out partnerships with charter operators to turn schools around, the manner in which some charters will have to scale up and grow will likely look different. There are some real advantages to these partnerships. For example, finding appropriate facilities for a charter school becomes less of an issue because they often take over the site of the former troubled school. But, Justin Cohen, president of the School Turnaround Group at Mass Insight, cautions that this incentive should be put into perspective. Turnarounds are “an enterprise in partnership through which the district and the charter will mutually solve the problems of a vexing school [and that] might involve compromise on some critical change conditions,” he explains.<sup>22</sup>

While charters generally enjoy a great deal of autonomy compared to traditional schools, charters entering a turnaround school in partnership with a district may have to compromise some of their autonomy. The following few sections take a closer look at two district-charter collaborations and how taking over a traditional school has required them to adapt their model to respond to district, teachers, parents, and students affiliated with these schools.

# District-CMO partnerships leading high school turnarounds

Charter schools and school districts have often worked side by side to improve access to a quality education within their communities, but they have not always worked together. Both charters and traditional schools are increasingly seeing the value in collaborating. Superintendents and charter school leaders in nine cities—Baltimore, Denver, Hartford, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Nashville, New Orleans, New York City, and Rochester—recently signed on to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s District-Charter Collaboration Compact.<sup>23</sup> Participating districts and charters commit to addressing some common tensions that have challenged their relationships over the years, such as access to equitable funding facilities for districts and charters, and a commitment for all partners to serve all students, improve struggling schools, and close underperforming schools if necessary.

The School Improvement Grants further encourage districts and charters to work together to improve struggling schools. Los Angeles and Philadelphia are two school districts that have engaged charters to turn around underperforming schools and improve the quality of secondary school options for students attending those schools.

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## Los Angeles Unified School District and Green Dot Public Schools

While many charter operators are still debating how school turnarounds fit in with their mission and organizational strategy, Green Dot Public Schools in Los Angeles leaped into the school improvement business when teachers opted to allow Green Dot to assume leadership of the chronically underperforming Alain Leroy Locke Senior High School in 2008. “For us, turnarounds are critical,” says Green Dot’s Director of Public Affairs Erica Gonzalez.<sup>24</sup> Green Dot’s mission is “about transforming public education ... The goal has always been that all students should have access to a quality public education—not just the kids who are lucky to go to a Green Dot school,” she explains.

Locke is Green Dot's first turnaround of a district school but it is not its first venture in trying to reform traditional public schools. Prior to Locke, Green Dot was strategically opening charter schools around underperforming district high schools in an effort to drive reform within those schools. They hoped that a little competition would encourage the public to take more notice of the city's education system. "We wanted people to pay attention when we started taking 1,000 students [from the school district]," Gonzalez reflects.

They also hoped to prove that urban high schools could be successful with the right strategies in place, even in traditional public school districts. Noting that Green Dot teachers are unionized, Gonzalez underscored how important it is that their model be replicable in the traditional school context—"So the excuses for other schools to improve are a nonstarter if we're doing it under the same conditions."

The opportunity to work with Los Angeles Unified School District, or LAUSD, to turn around Locke was a logical next step for Green Dot. The majority of tenured Locke teachers signed a petition to convert the school into a charter school in 2007, and Green Dot reopened the school the following year. Locke's performance on state assessments is not where it needs to be, but it is headed in the right direction. More Locke students are participating in the state's portfolio of assessments, and the percentage of students performing at the proficient and advanced level has inched upward since Green Dot's restart of the school.<sup>25</sup>

Green Dot's attendance and retention rates are more telling signs of Locke's early progress, as is students' access to more rigorous curricula. For example, Green Dot retained 95 percent of students in the 2009-2010 academic year, compared to an 84 percent retention rate in the academic year preceding Green Dot's management.<sup>26</sup> Forty-eight percent more Locke students are taking college-preparatory English language arts classes, and 56 percent more are taking college-preparatory math courses.<sup>27</sup> Green Dot is hopeful that the lessons that they have learned at Locke can be applied to other struggling district schools.<sup>28</sup>

LAUSD announced in January 2011 its dramatic turnaround plans for another chronically underperforming school—Jordan High School in Watts. The school, in which only 3 percent of students are proficient in math, will be divided into smaller campuses but will retain its identity as one school.<sup>29</sup> Citing his intention to apply the SIG restart model, former superintendent Ramon Cortines

announced that Green Dot and the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools— Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa’s nonprofit organization that manages 15 schools— will jointly manage the school.<sup>30</sup> Teachers will have to reapply if they desire a position at the school.

Charters and district staff are optimistic about future collaborations. José Cole-Gutiérrez, director of charter schools for LAUSD, highlighted the significance of the district’s leadership in creating a space for charters to play a role in LAUSD school operations that began under the watch of Cortines and is expected to continue under newly elected Superintendent John Deasy. “Our leaders have really pushed partnerships like Jordan and have been constructively critical where really needed,” Cole-Gutierrez says.<sup>31</sup> He also underscored the role that his office plays in helping advance relationships with the city’s charter schools, and that both he and the executive director of the Innovation and Charter School Division bring direct experience from having worked in the charter school community. Finally, he noted the Board of Education’s Public School Choice, or PSC, Resolution as another important initiative that encourages charters, as well as other external partners, to engage in school improvement and new school development.

### Public School Choice resolution

The district’s turnover of both Locke and Jordan high schools to charter operators are distinct from another turnaround effort in the district, the new Public School Choice resolution. The PSC resolution, which the LAUSD Board of Education adopted in August 2009, allows teams of teachers, the union, charter school operators, partnerships, nonprofit organizations, and other independent groups to bid for the management of new campuses and existing but academically struggling schools, known as Focus schools. For-profit organizations are not eligible to manage Focus schools.<sup>32</sup>

Focus schools are chronically underperforming schools that have been persistently identified for improvement as outlined by the No Child Left Behind Act and have a low Academic Performance Index Growth score—an annual measure of test score performance of California schools and districts.<sup>33</sup> In addition, no more than 20 to 30 percent of students in these schools are performing at the pro-



ficient or advanced levels on the state’s English language arts or math assessments. Focus high schools also have at least a 10 percent four-year dropout rate.

Prospective school operators of PSC Focus and new schools can choose from four school management models with varying degrees of autonomy and decision-making authority. School operators can choose a traditional school model or an in-district “pilot” school that has autonomy over budget and school operations.<sup>34</sup>

Two charter management models are also available to operators. An “affiliated charter school” is funded by the district and abides by LAUSD school policies but with increased flexibility around curriculum, staffing, and governance. All school staff remain employees of the district and are subject to the collective bargaining agreement. The schools must enroll the same students that it was previously serving.

Green Dot, the Alliance, and most CMOs have expressed interest in the PSC “independent charter school” option. A PSC independent charter school operates similarly to other charters in the state, with autonomy over curriculum, operations, staffing, and fiscal management. Like the affiliated charter school model—but unlike most other independent charter schools in the state—schools assuming this model must enroll the same students that the schools were intended to serve as traditional district schools, and the school buildings remain the property of the district.

District teachers at PSC independent charter conversions reapply for a position at the newly converted charter if they wish to stay at the school, or they can request a transfer to a different district school. This was similarly the case for teachers at Locke and is currently underway at Jordan High School. The United Teachers Los Angeles-LAUSD collective bargaining agreement permits permanent teachers at these schools to take an unpaid leave of absence on a year-to-year basis to work at converted charters for up to five years if they so choose.<sup>35</sup> Their tenure and seniority is preserved during this time, but they risk losing generous lifetime health benefits.

The district has created an accountability process for all PSC schools. PSC school operators develop their own goals with respect to academic achievement, attendance, college preparatory course taking, and graduation rates.<sup>36</sup> The superintendent reviews their progress on these benchmarks at least twice per year in

meetings that are open to the public. PSC schools will be considered for renewal every five years, though the superintendent can take immediate action to revoke the charter agreement if necessary and regain district control of the school.

The decision-making process to award the management of PSC schools builds on recommendations provided by a review panel made up of parents and community stakeholders as well as the superintendent, but the final decision ultimately resides with the school board. Charters and other education reform advocates criticized the school board's decision for the first cohort of schools, which heavily favored the teachers' union.<sup>37</sup> Charter school operators and advocates questioned the district's interest in partnering with the charter sector.

Charter operators were more successful in the second round.<sup>38</sup> Green Dot was the only CMO to apply for one of three struggling Focus schools on the list, and the board voted in favor of its application to turn around Clay Middle School in March 2011. Five other charter operators—Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, Synergy Academies, Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools, Aspire Public Schools, and Partnerships to Uplift Communities—were awarded six new campuses, including three charter high schools.<sup>39</sup>

The school district is currently accepting proposals for 22 struggling Focus schools and 15 new PSC campuses, which will open under new management in Fall 2012. A greater number of charter operators have expressed interest in turnaround Focus schools in this latest round, which includes eight high schools. The Alliance, Green Dot, Partnerships to Uplift Communities, and Granada Hills Charter High School have expressed interest in turning around at least 16 of the Focus schools, including most of the high schools.

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## School District of Philadelphia and Mastery Charter Schools

Mastery Charter Schools in Philadelphia, like Green Dot, tackled school turnarounds well before the Obama administration called on charters to support school improvement efforts. It opened its first charter high school startup in 2001. As a result of Mastery's success with this new school, the School District of Philadelphia contracted with the CMO to take over three underperforming middle schools and convert them into three middle-high schools serving grades 7-12. The first of these turnaround schools—the Thomas campus—opened in 2005 with grades seven

and eight. In spring 2010, the school graduated its first cohort of students, and sent 93 percent of its seniors to college.<sup>40</sup> The second and third schools, the Shoemaker and Pickett campuses, opened in 2006 and 2007, respectively.

While the CMO started off targeting grades 9-12 in its first startup, it is increasingly expanding downward as demonstrated in their restart of the three middle-high schools. “The longer that we have a young person, the better. So we are trying to tackle the feeder patterns,” says Courtney Collins-Shapiro, Mastery’s Deputy Chief Innovation Officer.<sup>41</sup>

And the district agrees with this strategy. “The real challenge in turning around high schools is by the time students get to the ninth grade, they’re so far behind... it’s why I think high school reform strategies—when they’re just high school reform strategies—fail,” says Associate Superintendent for Strategic Programs Diane Castelbuono.<sup>42</sup> In fall 2010, Mastery opened the doors to three more turnaround schools—all elementary schools—as part of the city’s new school improvement initiative, known as the Renaissance Schools Initiative.

The CMO is still committed to working with high schools while focusing on feeder patterns. Mastery was selected in spring 2011 to turn around Gratz High School in Philadelphia as well as an elementary school that feeds into the high school for the 2011-2012 academic year as part of the Renaissance initiative.<sup>43</sup>

### Philadelphia’s Renaissance Schools Initiative

Mastery Charter Schools, Mosaica, ASPIRA Inc. of Pennsylvania, and Foundations, Inc. are among some of the CMOs that the School District of Philadelphia is working with to turnaround schools as part of its Renaissance Schools Initiative, which was first implemented in the 2010-2011 school year. The initiative is designed to identify the district’s chronically underperforming schools, identify individuals and organizations to help turnaround the schools, and implement a process for community stakeholders to engage in the turnaround process.<sup>44</sup> Charter operators, including Mastery, are taking charge of four chronically struggling schools and will operate them as turnaround charter schools in the 2011-2012 year. Three of these four schools are high schools.<sup>45</sup>

The district selects “Renaissance Schools” based on a variety of performance data, including success toward state-mandated academic benchmarks, or adequate yearly progress, and the district’s school performance index, or SPI.<sup>46</sup> SPI is a composite measure that is heavily weighted toward growth and compares the performance of both traditional and charter schools in the district. In addition, the district prioritizes opportunities for clustering low-performing schools that share feeder patterns and targeting subgroups of students who have traditionally been represented at the lower end of the district’s academic achievement gap.

Renaissance Schools can take several forms. They may remain under the district’s management, convert to “contract schools” that are managed by an education management organization, or EMO, or convert to charter schools. Regardless of the model that they assume, all Renaissance schools must function as neighborhood schools and serve the same students that they were previously enrolling. They must also incorporate programming to address the needs of English language learners and special education students; encompass afterschool enrichment, athletics, and extracurricular activities; expand the school calendar, and require school uniforms.<sup>47</sup>

These schools face added accountability measures in comparison to other district schools. Each Renaissance school operates under a five-year performance agreement, contract, or charter, depending on the model. The district holds each school accountable for meeting annual performance and growth targets related to academic achievement, school climate, student retention and promotion, college-readiness, graduation rates, and parent and student satisfaction. As necessary, the district provides support or restructures the school if it continues to struggle to meet performance benchmarks under its new management.

#### *Turnaround teams*

Much like Los Angeles’s PSC resolution, Philadelphia’s Renaissance Initiative provides an opportunity for external providers to engage in the district’s school reform efforts. While the district continues to manage some Renaissance schools—sometimes in partnership with an external organization—it also solicits interest from a variety of entities to serve as “turnaround teams” for Renaissance schools that it does not manage. Eligible turnaround team applicants include teachers and principals, colleges and universities, community-based organizations, for-profit and nonprofit EMOs, and charter operators.

A committee made up of school district staff and external evaluators reviews the qualifications for each application that is submitted and identifies a set of applicants to move onto the second phase of the process. This smaller group of applicants submits a detailed school improvement plan.

The process for matching schools to turnaround teams and potential charter operators includes a role for parents and community members. Each Renaissance school has a school advisory council in which a majority of its members must be comprised of parents who have a child attending the school. Community stakeholders and students (if the school is a secondary school) may also serve on the councils. The councils review the turnaround team proposals and provide their recommendations to the superintendent. The school board, based on the superintendent's recommendations, makes the final school matches. In the most recent matching process that awarded Mastery control of a high school and elementary school, parents and communities were granted their first choice of charter operators in five of the six schools.<sup>48</sup>

### *Staffing and hiring*

Staffing procedures and policies at Renaissance schools vary depending on the school model. School staff at district-managed Renaissance Schools remain employees of the district and part of the local union's collective bargaining unit. A minimum of 50 percent of the teachers in some of these schools may be transferred to another district school if they are not rehired.<sup>49</sup>

The CMO has full control over the hiring process in Renaissance charter schools. District teachers and leaders who were previously employed at the school may reapply for a position at the school, but all school staff—except facility and food service employees—at Renaissance charter schools are employees of the CMO and no longer part of the collective bargaining unit. District teachers who are rehired by a Renaissance CMO have the option to request a leave of absence from the School District of Philadelphia (and the collective bargaining unit) for up to five years without losing their seniority or resign altogether before accepting the position at the charter school. “No more than a handful of teachers” returned to six of the seven first Renaissance charter schools, including those operated by Mastery.<sup>50</sup> However, the principal and approximately 40 percent of teachers returned to one converted charter school operated by another CMO—ASPIRA, Inc.

Renaissance charters lease the school buildings, which remain the district's property. It may be for this reason that the first cohort of Renaissance charter schools has been required to contract the district's facility and food services for at least the 2010-2011 school year. The employees performing these duties remain district employees and part of the collective bargaining unit.<sup>51</sup> This posed a problem for some charter operators because they were not always content with the service. In some cases, charters secured the services of outside providers, all while keeping on district custodial staff to adhere to the agreement. It is unclear how this might change in the future.

# Charter high schools in a turnaround environment

The district turnaround efforts in Los Angeles and Philadelphia are breaking new ground. Charter restarts or management of underperforming secondary schools at the scale that is starting in these two cities remains relatively new. District staff, charter operators, and turnaround experts agree—turning around a chronically struggling school is vastly different from starting a new school. The Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools has expressed interest in helping turn around several struggling high schools as part of the district’s upcoming round of PSC schools. Former chief development and communications officer David Tillipman, says, “It is a different practice. It significantly changes the way you do everything... In terms of an organization model and economic model, there are some significant departures from that.”<sup>52</sup>

Yet, turnaround CMOs are finding that many of the features that have been applied in their startup college-prep models are still beneficial in this more demanding context. These features are not unique to college-preparatory charter schools. CRPE’s Paul Hill has compared college-prep charter schools to the urban Catholic high schools of the 20th century:

*They provide a very familiar and well-proven form of education, and they provide students with the kinds of familial supports and middle-class role models that once made Catholic schools so important to poor European immigrants. But they are making it available to students for whom it was not previously available.*<sup>53</sup>

Hill describes these schools as authoritative, intellectually demanding, mission-focused, and fiercely dependent on a strong sense of personal responsibility that is shared among school staff, students, and parents.<sup>54</sup> Some of these features and how turnaround CMOs have adapted them to effectively support a new turnaround school are discussed in the sections that follow.

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## A focused school model

“The American high school tries to do too many things,” one high school CMO observed. The modern traditional high school often strives to be comprehensive and meet the diverse needs of all students. But, charter high schools have a tendency to buck this trend.

CRPE’s Gross says that charter high schools “are serving a certain kind of kid... very few [charter high] schools are trying to be an all-purpose type of school.”<sup>55</sup> CRPE’s analysis of national data coupled with field research on charter high schools indicates that such schools tend to cater to a certain type of student, such as English language learner students, “by design or consequence of enrollment.”<sup>56</sup> Or, their niche may be to focus on a particular type of instruction, such as distance learning. Their analysis found that only 5 percent of traditional high schools report having a “special academic focus,” such as distance learning or foreign language immersion, compared to 17 percent of charter high schools.

Charter operators, therefore, have grown accustomed to designing and implementing the school model that they believe will deliver the best results for students. And often, parents and students are seeking exactly the type of schooling that these charters offer, and that they may not be able to find in the traditional public school. “People in a [startup] charter school are coming to that school because they want something different. Teachers, students, and parents are more open to new approaches—new experiences,” says Raquel Farmer-Hinton, an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee who researches charter high schools.<sup>57</sup>

But, the dynamics are different once a charter operator takes over a traditional public school in the district. Charter operators entering an existing school can find challenges in implementing the targeted focus that is characteristic of their startups, and there may be pressure to expand or relax their model to accommodate a more diverse population.

For example, parent participation is one of the core tenets of Green Dot’s model. Green Dot parents are expected to volunteer at least 35 hours annually at their child’s school.<sup>58</sup> With many Locke students coming from single-parent family homes and foster care, this can be a challenging bar to meet. But, parents can tally up their hours by doing a variety of self-paced activities, including donating school supplies, completing school surveys, and helping their child demonstrate



strong student attendance.<sup>59</sup> Mastery Charter School’s model similarly features a strong parental engagement component. It is an area of concern for the district, which worries that the CMO’s expectations for parents may be unrealistic. The charter is working through the issue with the district.<sup>60</sup>

Adhering to a CMO’s school model can be especially difficult when the turnaround school is a high school. “The added complexity of the high school is that it’s not just about teaching these students,” explains The School Turnaround Group’s President Justin Cohen. The high school is often the epicenter of the community.<sup>61</sup> “It’s about the high school band. It’s about the football games,” he says. Turnaround operators entering a long-standing high school will have to battle various perceptions of what the ideal high school experience should entail. They will have to sell their version of high school to students as well as parents and community members, who may include alumni.

At Locke High School, which opened in the years following the 1960s Watts riots, some of the school’s most iconic programs were retained, including its football program and its longtime head coach. This sets Locke apart from many charter high schools, which often lack the capacity, space, and resources to operate a full athletics or fine arts program. Some charter high schools even unapologetically narrow these activities to focus on the issue at hand—getting students prepared for college.

Despite some of these challenges and ongoing negotiations with district staff and parents, both charter organizations are adhering to their model as much as possible. For example, Mastery Charter Schools’s turnaround schools, which have grown from middle to middle-high schools, have added sports and fine arts programming over the last several years. Mastery staff report that their retention rates have “skyrocketed” as a result. But, Mastery is clear about their mission—academics and college preparation come first.<sup>62</sup>

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### A smaller, personalized learning environment

Charter high schools are more likely to have a smaller student enrollment than traditional high schools—an advantage that they use to personalize and structure students’ learning experiences. New charter schools scale up smartly in lieu of scaling up quickly. Most charters build out their new schools one grade at time using an admissions lottery, and they often have flexibility in limiting their enrollment. On average, charter high schools have approximately 270 students

compared to 860 students in the traditional public high school.<sup>63</sup> Class sizes are generally smaller in charter high schools as well, averaging 21 students compared to 26 in traditional secondary schools.<sup>64</sup>

Charter operators that take over a turnaround school, however, may have less control over their school's overall size. Green Dot, for example, is required to serve any student in the surrounding area who would have enrolled in the school prior to its transformation. Mastery's turnaround schools must also enroll any students who attended the school before Mastery took over, and then give priority to students residing within their schools' boundaries until an enrollment limit dependent on each building's capacity is reached.

Green Dot creatively dealt with this challenge by establishing a series of small schools within the large urban campus. Each school operates under its own principal, curriculum, and school culture, though they share the campus's extra-curricular programming. The strategy used to achieve the small-school setting for each student was different from that used at other Green Dot schools, but the principles remained the same.

Green Dot's Erica Gonzalez explains the importance of this feature in their schools: "The advantage of a charter-like model at the high school level is that you're able to better connect students with their teachers. It helps set the tone of the culture. It helps to transform the school culturally."<sup>65</sup> Students are also less likely to fall through the cracks than might have been the case in their former school environment, and their needs are likely to be identified and addressed more quickly.

Mastery has had the advantage of scaling up its turnaround middle-high schools slowly—similar to its approach for starting up new charters—because the CMO's original cohort of turnaround schools were previously traditional middle schools. The CMO is growing out each school into middle-high schools by adding a grade level every year. Mastery's other turnaround schools currently include elementary schools, but Mastery will tackle its first turnaround 9-12 high school in the 2011-2012 academic year.

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### Unrelenting college preparation and expectations

"When I read the RAND report, I said, I know how this happens," Gross explained her reaction to RAND's finding that charter high school students are 7 to 15

percentage points more likely to graduate and earn a high school diploma than are traditional public high school students. In studying charter high schools, she finds that charter high schools that serve high numbers of minority students are more likely to identify themselves as college-prep high schools and offer a college-preparatory program than traditional public high schools.<sup>66</sup>

This characteristic of charter high schools is noteworthy given the dismal graduation rates among Latino and black students in particular—who together make up more than half of the charter school student population nationally.<sup>67</sup> “They have this expectation that kids will graduate and go onto college. This expectation is clear.”<sup>68</sup> She has also undertaken related research that finds that charter schools are less likely to provide a curriculum that primarily prepares students for the workforce upon high school completion.<sup>69</sup>

Turnaround operators taking charge of an underperforming high school face a monumental challenge. “The biggest unique ... thing that defines a high school turnaround is that most of the kids have been in other failing schools,” observes Justin Cohen.<sup>70</sup> “If a child enters ninth grade reading at the fourth grade level, that’s suddenly the high school’s challenge. But the K-8 experience is the responsible party,” he adds. The schools feeding into the high school are often marked by their own academic challenges and, therefore, students enter that high school with a long history of missed educational opportunities. Green Dot’s Gonzalez agrees: “When we get them, they’re further behind. The school system has failed them a lot longer.”<sup>71</sup> Green Dot’s ninth grade students are generally reading between a third grade and fifth grade level, for example.<sup>72</sup>

High school turnaround charter operators and turnaround experts alike mentioned the challenge of addressing issues related to literacy. In the year prior to Green Dot’s management of Locke High School, 12.7 percent of students were advanced or proficient in English language arts according to the California Standards Test.

Tackling literacy gaps at the high school level brings its own unique challenges. Secondary school students who lack the ability to read inevitably face challenges in accessing the necessary information to progress in other subjects. Mastery’s Collins-Shapiro adds that secondary school reading specialists are not easy to find despite the demand, noting that most reading specialists work at elementary schools. “Teaching a 17-year-old to read is different from teaching an 8-year-old to read. The literacy piece is huge,” she says.<sup>73</sup>

And the timeframe with which turnaround operators have to work with high school students is much shorter and the stakes are higher if they are to graduate on time. One CMO noted, “From the restart, it’s not a four-year or a six-year graduation rate timeline...there are a lot of disincentives for [charter] schools to take on a failing high school and still meet the AYP targets,” or the academic targets set by the state as required by federal law.

But that has not swayed charter operators from their goal of preparing all their students for college. “All Green Dot schools have the A-G curriculum. This is a huge difference from traditional high schools,” says Green Dot’s Gonzalez. The A-G curriculum is a sequence of 15 required high school courses that all students must complete to study at a four-year public college in California. High Tech High School in San Diego and the Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools—other charter operators that target California high schoolers—also require all of their students to complete this sequence of courses. Meanwhile, only about a third (34 percent) of all California students and 23 percent of black and Latino students graduate meeting the A-G curriculum requirements.<sup>74</sup> Research has shown that completing a rigorous high school curriculum is the biggest predictor of college success.<sup>75</sup>

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## College counseling

Raquel L. Farmer-Hinton finds that college counseling in charter high schools can look a little different in comparison to that found in traditional high schools. The smaller, more personalized environment that is often common to the charter high school environment, along with high expectations and programs that infuse college-going as the norm, distinguishes the college-planning process at charter high schools from most traditional high schools.<sup>76</sup>

“Counseling in [traditional] high schools is organized differently. In charter schools, you’re more likely to have the same counselor through all four years,” while the counseling workload in the traditional high school can be overwhelming and organized less strategically, Farmer-Hinton explains.<sup>77</sup> The average student-to-counselor ratio in traditional high schools is 467:1 according to the College Board but the ratio is as high as 809:1 in California and 1,076:1 in Illinois.<sup>78</sup> Further, traditional high schools may assign students to counselors alphabetically according to students’ surnames, or each grade cohort might be assigned to a different counselor each year resulting in a more “disjointed” college guidance program.<sup>79</sup>

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## A strong school culture

Evaluating successful turnarounds across organizations in various sectors—including the nonprofit, public, and private sectors—Emily Ayscue Hassel and Bryan Hassel of Public Impact write that “[S]uccessful turnaround leaders choose a few high-priority goals with visible payoffs and use early success to gain momentum.”<sup>80</sup> Revamping the school culture is often one of the first challenges that school turnaround experts tackle, particularly in the first year of a school’s turnaround.<sup>81</sup> And, charter operators are especially skilled at this strategy.

“When seeking to turnaround a troubled school, the ability to forge and maintain a coherent school culture becomes exponentially more important,” says American Enterprise Institute’s Rick Hess of turnarounds at the high school level.<sup>82</sup> “When dealing with high-school-aged youth, the consequences of long-term disaffection is that at-risk students will challenge authority and behavioral boundaries,” Hess adds. A strict code of conduct, revamping the school’s appearance, and staffing the school with teachers and leaders who share the school’s mission and have high expectations for their students are vital tools with which charter operators seek to establish a new, more productive culture.

## A strict code of conduct

Mastery’s model includes a strong emphasis on school culture to help students acclimate to a high-expectations learning environment. Each school has a School Culture Team that is responsible for building relationships with students, maintaining a positive school culture, celebrating student achievements, and working with teachers to identify discipline or social and emotional problems that individual students might be facing.<sup>83</sup> In addition, the school has a strong code of conduct based on merits and demerits, requires all students to wear a uniform, and requires all parents and students to sign both a nonviolence contract as well as a contract outlining their responsibilities as part of the school’s community.

A well-managed school climate and a strong code of conduct are not uncommon across charter high schools.<sup>84</sup> Both district and charter staff report some challenges in this area, however, when it comes to a school turnaround. Charters taking over the operation of a traditional neighborhood school may be encouraged to relax their disciplinary approach to match those of the district while some charters might believe that this is integral to their model.

## Staffing schools with demanding teachers

Autonomy over hiring and other staffing practices is a central component of the charter school model. Charter operators will likely hesitate to take charge of a turnaround school unless they have great latitude over staffing up the school. Most charter operators rely on their staff to change or establish a school culture.

Green Dot and Mastery both took charge of hiring their own school principals and teachers for their turnaround schools. At Locke High School, former teachers were required to reapply for their job, and the CMO rehired approximately 30 percent.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, former district staff at Mastery’s turnaround middle-high schools as well as their Renaissance elementary schools were invited to reapply for a position at the reformed school, but the CMO largely started from scratch.<sup>86</sup> Among the most important criterion for both CMOs in their hiring of teachers for their schools is that prospective teachers believe that all the students can learn and meet high expectations.<sup>87</sup>

## Revamping the school’s appearance

Facilities are a persistent challenge for charter operators, but the challenges are slightly different in a turnaround situation. Charter operators taking over a turnaround school may not have to worry about finding space but they often have to make the most of the physical space with which they are provided. In the case of some chronically underperforming schools, the schools—which some CMOs described as “decrepit”—are in dire need of modernization.

CMOs that have taken over turnaround schools often dig into their own pockets and make significant investments in revamping the schools to help promote a changed learning environment for students. Justin Cohen agrees that this is important: “There are the sort of things that you use to convey that this is a different place than what it used to be ... and so much of this is about textiles.”<sup>88</sup> New paint, classroom furniture, technology, and landscaping, help students understand that they are walking into a new, different school, even if it is located on the same corner.

And districts are taking note. “We’re learning from this process how important the little things are,” says Diane Castelbuono of the School District of Philadelphia. She is familiar with the standards that charter operators expect in their schools because they must employ the district’s janitorial staff for the first year per the union contract, and the CMOs are not always content with the service. Simple things such as clean bathrooms stocked with hand soap and paper towels demonstrate respect for the students, she says.

# Findings

Secretary Duncan has challenged schools and the public to act boldly to retool the American education system, starting with the country’s persistently lowest-performing schools and dropout factories. Some school districts are forging partnerships with charter school providers in their community to take on some of the most challenging turnarounds, including their high schools.

The Los Angeles Unified School District—with Green Dot—and the School District of Philadelphia—with Mastery Charter School and other charter management organizations—are among those leading this effort. Particularly unique about these examples is that high school reform is playing such a prominent role.

Charter school staff, including those with CMOs that have not yet taken on a turnaround school, district staff, and other experts shared their thoughts on steps that might further support CMO-district partnerships or increase the chances of success in such efforts. These early thoughts can prove helpful to charter school leaders, districts, and policymakers who are interested in strengthening the conditions for district-charter partnerships to take shape.

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## Autonomy

Both districts and charters should be very clear about the degree of autonomy that the charter operator will enjoy in a turnaround partnership. Turnaround experts encourage charters to “get as close to chartering level conditions as possible,” particularly with respect to staffing. CMOs engaging in turnarounds agree that they need full authority over hiring and compensation.

Green Dot and Mastery have generally been able to achieve a great deal of autonomy over staffing in their turnaround schools, and the new turnaround initiatives in both cities accommodate this autonomy. District teachers in converted schools have to reapply for their jobs or transfer to another district school. Teachers



rehired by the CMOs are no longer considered district employees or members of their collective bargaining unit. Unions affiliated with both districts permit teachers to take a leave of absence from the district for up to five years without risking tenure to work with the converted charter—which can help relieve some of the staffing burden should the CMO want to rehire some of the teachers. Los Angeles district teachers, however, risk losing some generous health benefits that even unionized charters like Green Dot will find hard to match. Ultimately, they may be dissuaded from working at converted turnaround charters even when attracted to the mission and CMO’s school model.

Turnaround charters and experts express that full autonomy over the school’s budget and curricula, school operations, and pedagogy are and should be non-negotiable. In general, Mastery and Green Dot are using the same school model in both their turnaround and startup charter schools. They have the flexibility to expand learning time, increase course rigor, foster a college-going culture in these schools, and allocate their school budget accordingly. It is unlikely that they would engage turnaround schools without such autonomies.

At the same time, “charters have to be willing to lose some of their autonomy,” says one individual with a turnaround CMO. Charter operators generally understand that their enrollment and recruitment strategies have to change to ensure that they are serving students residing in the school’s catchment area. The new turnaround initiatives in Philadelphia and Los Angeles make this a requirement for charters taking on existing struggling schools. This can result in some challenges for charters, which are typically accustomed to being more in control of their enrollment size and recruitment strategies. At Locke, Green Dot has confronted this challenge by breaking down the school into several campuses to adequately manage the size. A similar plan is underway at the middle school they will be operating in fall 2011, where Green Dot plans to create two schools on the campus.

Similarly, district staff underscored the importance of obtaining a CMO’s commitment to provide the necessary resources to serve special education students and English language learners. LAUSD and Philadelphia’s school district considered this—as well as serving all existing and future students in the school’s boundaries—a non-negotiable requirement for charters interested in partnering. LAUSD provided the special education services in Locke’s first year but the CMO has since taken this over. Similarly, monitoring reports of Mastery’s turnaround elementary schools suggest that the CMO has moved quickly to address the needs of their special education English language learner students.<sup>88</sup>

District staff also indicated that sharing school data and communicating regularly about the school's progress is critical. LAUSD requires turnaround charters and other school operators to hold at least one to two meetings with the superintendent per year as part of the accountability process that they have established for their turnaround schools. Parents and community members can attend these meetings. In Philadelphia, district staff conduct annual assessments of each charter's performance agreement. In addition, each school's advisory council, which is made up of parents and school staff, separately conducts its own review several times throughout the academic year.

While both charters and districts identified certain non-negotiable elements to their partnership early on, school discipline and parent engagement are two areas in which early expectations were less defined. Charter high schools often take a more demanding approach to parental engagement and school discipline. Some charter operators have defined clear thresholds related to conduct and parental engagement and perceive them as integral to their school models. District officials, however, might feel that their practices can be exceptionally harsh for schools that should function as neighborhood schools, and that they can deter students from enrolling or staying in school. Charter operators and districts should consider clearly defining the parameters related to conduct and parental engagement early in their partnership.

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## Human capital support

Several individuals noted that finding an adequate supply of effective teachers and leaders is likely to be one of the greatest challenges limiting the role of charters in turnarounds. In fact, the lack of effective teachers and leaders is likely to stymie any district's large-scale turnaround effort. For these reasons, states, districts, unions, charters, and education entrepreneurs will have to collaborate on ways to staff turnaround schools strategically—regardless of whether they remain district schools or convert to charters.

Many charter schools already heavily rely on organizations that are adept at recruiting and training nontraditional teachers and school leaders, including Teach for America, New Leaders for New Schools, and The New Teacher Project, or TNTTP. But, the timeframe in which CMOs are often notified that they will be a turnaround operator and the school's reopening is typically short. For example, charters recently selected to serve as turnaround operators for Los Angeles and Philadelphia turnaround schools for the 2011-2012 academic year were

informed as late as mid-March. Even more challenging, these turnaround schools will require a fully staffed school for all grade levels—instead of the incremental grade-by-grade approach to which startup charters are accustomed. Finding effective high school teachers can be especially difficult, making the task more challenging for a charter operator taking over a low-performing secondary school.

A large-scale turnaround effort that relies on charter schools should ideally address staffing needs at all affected schools—traditional district and charter schools. New Orleans is an example of one city where various stakeholders have worked together to produce creative staffing solutions for all city schools. TNTP, the Recovery School District in New Orleans, and New Schools for New Orleans collaborated to staff both high-need district and charter schools in the city. Potential other strategies may include providing teachers and leaders with some security to explore their employment options by developing “thin” union contracts for staff of turnaround charters—similar to Green Dot’s—or permitting district teachers to take a leave of absence from the district with limited repercussions if they return.

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## Funding and facilities

The turnaround charters highlighted in this paper did not have to face the challenge of finding school space, however, financial resources are likely to limit charters from engaging in or scaling up their turnaround efforts. The funding gap between charter schools and traditional public schools is well documented with charter schools, on average, receiving approximately 22 percent less in funding.<sup>89</sup>

Turnaround charter schools are funded similarly to other charters in both Philadelphia and Los Angeles. States and districts will have to work more aggressively to ensure that funding follows the child in charter conversions if charter-district partnerships increase to address turnarounds. The turnaround charters highlighted in this paper did not have to face the challenge of finding school space, however. CMOs lease the school buildings from the districts in both cities.

Both district and charter staff identified the need for resources to support the cleanup and renovations that are often necessary in a turnaround school to support a change in school culture. Describing the resources needed to prepare schools for a turnover, one individual explained: “Some of these buildings hadn’t been cleaned in 50 years. These kinds of things take money. This is the kind of thing that stops reform in its tracks.”

Generally, charter operators are prepared to invest a substantial amount of their own dollars to remodel a turnaround school because they see this as an important part of changing or establishing the school’s culture. Their capacity to engage in additional turnarounds, however, could be limited by the capital costs involved since they are not likely to compromise this strategy.

High school turnarounds can be particularly challenging. Physically revamping a large urban high school campus can be especially resource intensive. Some cash-strapped charter operators may shy away from the opportunity to take on such a campus as a result.

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### Reducing administrative barriers

Districts and other experts pointed to a variety of ways in which administrative barriers that often slowed down their reform efforts could be reduced. School turnarounds, particularly those that involve partnering with charters, require increased flexibility in staffing, funding, and school operation. Districts often need to seek regulatory waivers from the state, and they need to seek them quickly given the relatively short timeframe involved in turnarounds. Fast-tracking the waiver process for districts working in partnership with charters to turnaround schools can prevent reforms from stalling and encourage other similar partnerships.

The novelty of district-charter partnerships to operate schools presents some challenges for districts. States can support districts by providing templates of management and performance contracts that outline the critical parameters for a district-CMO turnaround partnership. Districts also welcomed support to help monitor outside providers, or assistance in building district capacity to monitor and manage such partnerships.

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### Increasing public will

Individuals across the board remarked on the need to provide more incentives for district-charter partnerships to improve schools. “You’re relying on the do-the-right-thing strategy,” said one individual. And even when there is interest in such a partnership, it can be a struggle to see it to fruition. “Politically—you have to be able to spend a great deal of political capital to work with the district, teachers, and the community,” said one CMO who found it ironic how much charter operators have to plead to take over a failing school.

Increasing public knowledge of charter schools was identified as a need. A great deal of animosity toward charter schools, mostly fueled by misconceptions or a lack of understanding of these schools, remains despite the charter school sector's growth. Absence of community buy-in due to misinformation can stall even the most well-intentioned partnerships.

Both districts have made efforts to engage parents, high school students, and the community in the selection of turnaround providers and in monitoring their progress as part of their turnaround initiatives to mitigate concerns. But, resistance to restructuring the schools—particularly when restructuring includes a role for charter operators—remains strong in both Los Angeles and Philadelphia.

The teachers union in Los Angeles has filed a lawsuit resisting the district's recent decisions to turn over Jordan High School and Clay Middle School to Green Dot. Student and community protests in Philadelphia have broken out following district announcements to match more of their struggling schools with charter operators and other external providers. One important silver lining—initial reports from parents and community members who are affected by the first cohort of turnaround charters under Philadelphia's Renaissance initiative indicate that they are pleased with the degree of progress achieved at the new schools, including those run by Mastery.<sup>90</sup>

# Conclusion

District and charter collaborations to turnaround schools, such as those taking place in Los Angeles and Philadelphia, are few in number, and the challenge of revamping 5,000 schools of which 40 percent are high schools looms large. These partnerships have been hard fought. A colorful history between some of these charters and their district allies precedes these partnerships, and the collaboration requires ongoing negotiations and discussions.

Charter leaders have good reason to pause and consider whether they should heed the administration's call to turnaround failing district schools. Not only might this require charters to grow to scale—and overcome the various barriers to do so—but it would likely require them to grow differently. Some, like Green Dot, the Alliance, and Mastery, however, might feel compelled by their mission to improve public education at a scale that is perhaps not feasible with new charter school development alone. For such charter leaders, the efforts of these districts and charters are valuable.

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