EAB

Strategies for Successful District-Charter Partnerships

District Leadership Forum

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1) Executive Overview

Key
Observations

Leverage existing school district resources to achieve economies of scale and operate partnership schools most efficiently. All profiled schools rely on existing school district resources and services to ensure successful school operations. According to contacts at **Institution B**, although partnership school models vary, districts often manage transportation services, facilities maintenance services, and food services. Contacts at Institution B note that typical school-governed services include financial services and human resources-related functions. As contacts at **School D** describe, reliance on larger district service structures allows individual partnership schools to provide these services more efficiently than if they provided these services independently.

Provide partnership school leaders with customized professional development resources to ensure school success through effective administration. Partnership schools' unique structures increase the importance of professional development resources tailored to this specific governance model. For example, administrators at **Institution B** provide specialized professional development resources to partnership school leaders. These resources include support services such as regular meetings with Institution B professional development coaches, coordination of school visits, and funding for educators' trips to relevant conferences.

Engage parents to maximize community support for new partnership school models. Administrators at **School D** communicate frequently with parents to clarify any misconceptions about the division of responsibilities between school administrators and district administrators (e.g., ownership of school facility safety, school area transportation). This alleviates potential confusion caused by the complex partnership school model. To involve parents more broadly, contacts at **Institution C**, a partnership school network, operate a robust parent education program. The parent education program, operated by nine Institution C staff members, provides parents with monthly opportunities to learn how to support their students' educational experiences. Courses address topics such as Common Core curriculum, postsecondary financial aid processes, and socio-emotional learning. Parents graduate from the program upon attending five sessions throughout the year.

Collect and analyze student data to identify best-fit community organization partnerships. Contacts at all profiled districts note that community partnerships vary between schools, based upon student needs. To best align student needs to available community resources, student support counselors at **School D** collect data on short and long-term student risk factors (e.g., mental health concerns, housing insecurity) and input these insights into the district's student information system. School administrators then use this information to determine the most meaningful community partnerships to pursue.

2) District-Charter Partnership Development

Governance

District-Charter Partnerships Provide School Autonomy and Economies of Scale

In the face of growing concerns over unsuccessful school models with unsatisfactory student outcomes, several school systems across the country have elected to explore options for district-charter partnerships. In this model, partnership schools operate with a high degree of autonomy (similar to a typical charter school) but can still rely on some district services to support students. This model provides partnership schools with the freedom to innovate while maintaining access to more cost-effective district service structures.

Overview of Profiled Partnership School Institutions

Organization	Key Details
District A	• Formally authorizes 11 charter schools, with which the district has the closest relationship • Less formally partners with 8 additional schools, to which the district provides financial and logistical support
Institution B	• Partner organization with local government and local district • Incubator for new innovation schools • Provides professional development and support resources to educators developing new innovation schools
Institution C	• Network of 18 partnership schools run cooperatively with local school district • Operates in three distinct neighborhoods/feeder patterns • Partnership schools do not receive district funding and rely on philanthropic donations from individuals and foundations
School D	• Charter school run in partnership with district high school located at the same site • Students can take classes between the two parts of the school • School designed so that the district could limit active competition with successful charter schools

Contacts at **Institution B** describe one major example of this movement towards partnership schools. In 2014, Institution B's state government established the option for districts to convert failing schools into partnership schools to avoid state takeover. In 2015, the state government amended this process to allow districts to pursue this model for any school—not just the least successful schools in the district. This change created more collaboration opportunities for organizations such as Institution B.

Partnership Schools Offer Benefits Unavailable to Traditional Charter Schools

District leaders communicate the benefits of district-charter partnership to charter school leaders to persuade educators to pursue partnerships instead of operating independently. Contacts at **Institution B** report that partnership schools receive local property tax funding from the areas in which they operate—funding that is not allocated to local charter schools. Administrators at **District A** also use public funding to persuade charter school leaders to collaborate on school development with the

district. Charter school leaders who formally partner with District A have access to a one million dollar annual public-funding pool that they would not be able to use as an independently-operating charter school.

Partnership school administrators can also access existing district service networks to provide support services to their students at lower costs than if they developed these support networks independently. Administrators at **School D** describe that they would be unable to offer students programming such as a full school band or a school football team on their own. By partnering with a local district high school, School D can offer these opportunities to students.

Contacts at Institution B note that partnership schools benefit from the economies of scale associated with existing district transportation and facilities services, rather than developing smaller and more expensive relationships with vendors on their own. Though district leadership provides partnership schools with access to district transportation networks in District A, contacts highlight that some partnership school administrators elect to manage this independently to operate transportation routes more efficiently for their students.

In terms of student performance, administrators at both District A and Institution B see improved student outcomes at partnership schools compared to district schools. Specifically, administrators at Institution B report that their partnership schools were the only group of schools in the local district to experience gains in the most recent round of standardized testing. State-level standardized testing data supports this claim, showing that Institution B-supported partnership schools saw students' success rates on exams increase by nearly two percent from the 2015-2016 academic year to the 2016-2017 academic year.[1] In comparison, the local district as a whole saw success rates decrease by about one percent over that same period.[2] Notably, though, administrators at District A do acknowledge that they seek out existing high-performing schools for partnership, so there is certainly selection bias skewing performance improvements.

[1] Data referenced includes all Institution B-supported schools for which data is publicly available.

Potential Benefits of District-Charter Partnership Models

Partnership School Benefits

- Academic Improvement
- Access to Student Support Services
- Access to District Funding
- Limited District-Charter Competition
- Diversified Student Extracurricular Activities
- District-Provided Professional Development
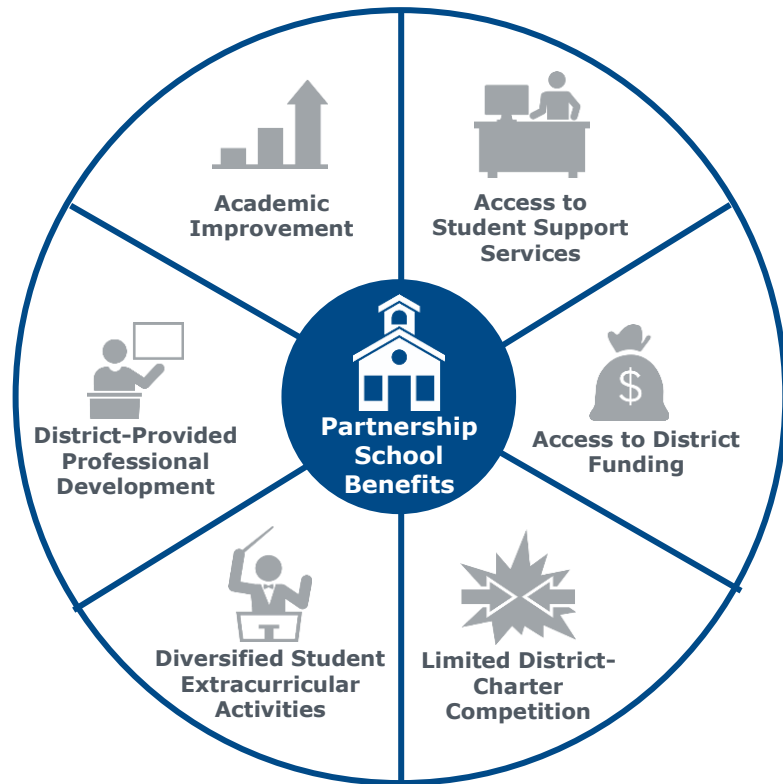
Adapt Governance Models to Fit Needs of Each Individual Partnership School

All profiled institutions note that specific operational relationships between schools and districts vary from school to school. Generally, each individual partnership school negotiates its own agreement with the district, which dictates specific governance structures. This case-by-case process allows schools to negotiate relationships with the district to fit their exact needs.

Common Division of Responsibilities at Profiled Partnership Schools

Common School-Level Responsibilities	Case-Dependent Responsibilities	Common District-Level Responsibilities
Curriculum Development	Transportation	Facilities Management
Personnel Management	Food Services	School Safety
Student Discipline	Special Education	Student Data Management

Some districts provide several distinct governance avenues for partnership schools. Administrators at **District A** formally authorize 11 charter schools and form less strict

partnerships with eight additional schools. The authorized schools must adhere to a comprehensive set of guidelines and have easier access to district support structures. The informal partners commit to a less stringent set of academic standards and goals but can still access district levy funding.

All profiled partnership schools and organizations include partnership school students in district enrollment counts and in student information systems.

Students are also evaluated within the same standardized testing framework as traditional public school students. In some cases, though, the evaluation process differs slightly because of variance in enrollment policies. For example, while administrators evaluate traditional district school students at District A against other district school students, administrators evaluate partnership school students against other partnership school students to ensure more accurate school context-related comparisons. Variance in enrollment policies partially drive the need for more nuanced comparisons. Specifically, district schools must adhere to specific school enrollment zones, while partnership schools can enroll students from across the district.

School Selection

Consider Student Pathways when Selecting Partnership School Candidates

Contacts at **District A** and **Institution C** both emphasize the importance of selecting new and existing schools for partnership model collaboration intentionally, especially based upon district geography. Student pathways can be a key consideration not only for initial partnership school network development, but also for future network expansion. Contacts at District A describe that strategic mapping of potential partnership schools prevents overlap of partnership schools' reach within similar neighborhoods.

Instead of spacing partnership schools out throughout the district, **Institution C** focuses on developing partnership networks within three geographic clusters. Through this strategy, students can remain a part of the partnership school network for their entire K-12 careers.

Educators at Institution C believe that this feeder pattern-oriented development model eases student transitions between elementary, middle, and high schools. Administrators also see advancement-focused benefits because many donors are more inclined to support particular neighborhoods or communities, compared to standalone partnership schools.

Between these two geographically-oriented partnership school placement strategies, it is valuable to select partnership schools based upon students' K-12 pathways, but to also avoid oversaturating the local education market with too many school options.

> **❗**
> ### Consider Geographic Requirements for Partnership Schools
>
> Contacts at **Institution B** report that partnership schools can implement a geographic preference for student enrollment, while traditional charter schools must have a fully open enrollment system. Through geographic preference, partnership schools can tailor their enrollment to fit school priorities. For example, contacts at Institution B describe that one particular partnership school wanted to embed itself in a specific neighborhood community, and that it would not be able to give enrollment preference to that community's residents as a charter school.

Profiled Institutions Consider Multiple Avenues for Partnership School Selection and Development

By opening partnership school opportunities for schools with different needs, districts can ensure that students at many different types of schools can access the benefits of the partnership school model. Even if turnaround schools have already been targeted for partnership model conversion, future expansion of partnership school networks benefits from increased accessibility. Contacts at **Institution B** report that the organization's local district partner allows multiple entry points to the partnership school model.

Partnership School Model Entry Points for Collaborators with
Institution B

District leadership can convert a failing school into a partnership school with all new staff.

School leadership can proactively decide to join the local partnership school network to gain access to the model's benefits.

New schools can open as partnership schools to gain benefits unavailable to charter schools.

Secure Stakeholder Buy-In to Ensure Effective Partnership Model Implementation

To become a partnership school with **District A**, schools must achieve board approval first. Administrators at **Institution B** also prioritize school stakeholder buy-in prior to formalizing partnership school relationships. Before Institution B will collaborate with school leaders to facilitate partnership school development, they require school leaders to garner buy-in from teachers and staff members. If school leaders cannot show that they have gained teacher buy-in, Institution B will not consider the school for partnership development.

School Development

Implement In-Depth Recruitment Processes to Identify Strong School Leaders

Partnership schools' complex structures require strong relationships between school and district leaders, as described by contacts at **School D**. Thus, it is important for

districts and partnership school organizers to recruit the right administrators to lead these schools.

Leaders at **Institution B** operate a partnership school incubator program, which helps educators develop district-affiliated partnership schools. Institution B focuses program recruitment efforts on educators seeking to develop schools that fit the district's expressed needs. Administrators typically receive about 40 total applications from prospective school leaders. From this applicant pool, a team of Institution B leaders, local district leaders, local governmental leaders, and local community members select four to five fellows each year.

Application Excerpt for Partnership School Development Program at *Institution B*

Partnership School Development Program Application

- **Describe in detail your proposed school's mission and educational model.**
  - What is the problem in education that your school solves?
  - Why is your school necessary in this local area?
  - What are the key components of your school's educational model?

- **Why are you the ideal person to conceive of and launch a partnership school?**
  - Why are you well-positioned to design and lead a new school?
  - What will your role be in leading your school, specifically with regard to the academic and operational duties? What roles will you delegate to others?

- **Please explain how you will use the fellowship program to further develop and launch your school.**
  - In what areas will you need additional support?
  - What are your greatest weaknesses, and how will you compensate for them?
  - What do you anticipate as your greatest challenges to launching a new school?

Provide Partnership School Leaders with Robust Professional Development Resources

Partnership school models require targeted professional development for school leaders given the models' unique operational challenges. Participants in **Institution B**'s fellowship program receive support related to partnership school development for one or two years. Contacts describe that educators developing schools within existing charter school networks typically only require a year of Institution B support. Educators developing schools outside of existing networks typically require two years of support to build independent operational structures.

Although some of Institution B's professional development resources may be most useful to leaders of new schools, the institution also offers several resources that can benefit school leaders at existing schools. For example, fellowship program participants meet with their fellowship cohorts monthly to discuss school development, and they meet individually with Institution B staff on a weekly or bi-weekly basis for school development coaching. Participants also take one international and two domestic trips per year to visit particularly successful schools. One of the domestic trips focuses on community engagement and the other focuses on school design.

Institution B also provides fellowship program participants with compensation and workspace to devote to school development. Internal professional development resources focus on the partnership school approval process through the local school board and contract negotiation with district leaders, among other pressing topics. In addition, fellowship program participants can access Institution B funding for external professional development opportunities, such as conferences specific to their desired school model.

3) Ongoing District-Charter Partnership Support

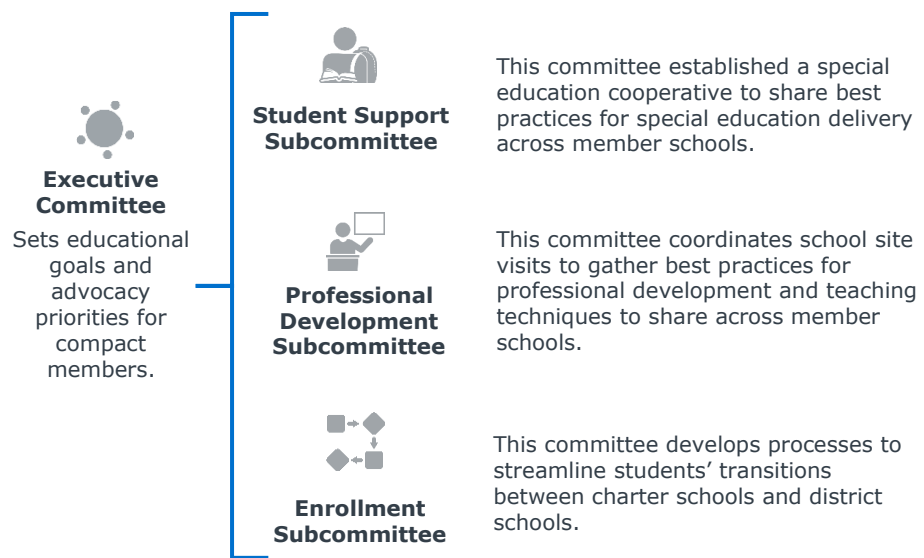**District-Charter Relations**

Maintain Open Lines of Communication between Partnership Schools and District Leadership

District leaders should maintain open lines of communication with partnership school leaders after schools open. This ensures that partnership schools avoid common challenges of district-partnership school collaboration. Contacts at **School D** report that a lack of clear communication channels makes it difficult for district leaders to communicate broadly relevant announcements, such as weather delays, to partnership school leaders and families.

To combat communications and coordination-related issues such as these, administrators at **District A** operate a district-charter working group, which provides collaboration opportunities for district leaders and charter leaders on issues of mutual interest. All schools that formally partner with the district participate in the district-charter working group, along with a majority of the city's independent charter schools. The compact includes an executive committee, with half of its members coming from charter-focused district leadership and half from administrators at local charter schools. While the executive committee provides high-level leadership and establishes advocacy priorities for the compact group, the organization also includes subcommittees on enrollment, student services, and professional development.

Each subcommittee sets its own goals within its operational area to improve outcomes for both district school and charter school students. In addition to this formal committee-based work, charter school leaders collaborate through the compact to pool resources for joint health benefits programs that save schools money compared to negotiating these plans independently. Leaders from both district and charter schools also participate in joint social gatherings designed to break down barriers and historical feelings of distrust between these two local school communities.

Committee Breakdown and Sample Responsibilities in *District A*'s District-Charter Working Group

Executive Committee

Sets educational goals and advocacy priorities for compact members.

Student Support Subcommittee

This committee established a special education cooperative to share best practices for special education delivery across member schools.

Professional Development Subcommittee

This committee coordinates school site visits to gather best practices for professional development and teaching techniques to share across member schools.

Enrollment Subcommittee

This committee develops processes to streamline students' transitions between charter schools and district schools.

Develop Parent Education Programs to Engage Parents in Partnership Schools

Similar to traditional public schools or charter schools, partnership school leaders should focus on parent engagement efforts to improve student outcomes and embed their schools more fully in local communities. **Institution C** has found a particularly effective parent engagement strategy through its parent education program. In this program, Institution C staff members lead monthly workshops for parents about how to best support their students' educational careers.

Institution C's Parent Education Program Components

Parent education workshops occur on Saturdays to minimize scheduling conflicts for working parents.

Staff members provide participants with childcare support to parents who wish to bring their children with them and also serve two meals during the workshop.

Programming rotates between **Institution C**'s three school communities to ease transportation access for students and their families.

Parents are named graduates of the program if they attend at least five sessions over the course of the academic year. Last year, about 1,200 parents graduated from the parent education program.

The program offers several tracks covering topics such as the college application process and social-emotional learning tactics.

Partnership for Institution C's Parent Education Tracks and Sampling of Courses

Academic Empowerment
- Common Core
- Reading Comprehension
- Financial Aid
- Blended Learning

Leadership & Advocacy
- Decision Making in Education & The Story of Self
- Power & Relationship Building
- Research Analysis & Public Policy
- Identifying Issues & Engaging Stakeholders

Restorative Justice
- Community Building Circles
- Restorative Dialogue
- Social-Emotional Learning
- Building a Supportive & Peaceful Home

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Clearly Delineate Charter and District Responsibilities to Minimize Parent Confusion

With school operations divided between district and school control, parents can become confused about the right point person to contact regarding a given issue. As contacts at **School D** describe, this confusion can lead parents to seek assistance from the wrong administrators and increase their frustration with the school community. Administrators at School D highlight examples such as parents having interpersonal conflicts with district staff members but raising their concerns to partnership school administrators. Parents then become frustrated when partnership school administrators are unable to solve the issue.

To guard against these types of conflicts with parents, administrators at School D clearly communicate the division of responsibilities between district and charter leaders to parents when issues arise. This helps parents better understand which issues require charter leader attention and which issues require district leader attention. Administrators at School D engage in as-needed, in-person conversations with both parents and district leaders to navigate any miscommunications or misconceptions about school operations and governance.

Community Partnerships

Communicate Openly with School Leaders to Manage Community Partnerships

Administrators at all profiled institutions believe that community partnerships for schools must be tailored to the local school context and fit local needs. Thus, contacts describe that community partnerships vary from school to school. In addition, the most effective partnerships differ based on specific student needs. Therefore, administrators should complete robust needs assessments to evaluate the partnerships that will be most helpful to their particular group of students.

This needs assessment process can be successful in many different forms, ranging in degrees of formality. Administrators at **District A** lead an informal needs assessment process, engaging with school leaders in ad-hoc conversations about community partnerships on an as-needed basis.

Administrators at **Institution B** and at **Institution C** both operate slightly more formal needs assessment processes where central staff members in charge of community partnerships meet with school-level administrators to discuss student needs and develop roadmaps for partnership development. Staff members at Institution C also help school-level leaders budget for community partnerships because the institution does not provide additional funding for these partnerships.

In addition to this informal support, administrators at Institution B also provide school-level leaders with small monetary grants to support the development of valuable community partnerships.

Leverage Student Data to Drive Needs Assessment Process

Administrators at **School D** use the most formal needs assessment methods of profiled institutions. School leadership relies on student data to identify areas of high need for community partnerships. Through conversations with students, student support counselors note types of student need and record this information in the district's student information system. Administrators can then analyze and evaluate this student risk factor information to determine which community partnerships may

be the most valuable to pursue. For example, after a recent hurricane, many School D students experienced homelessness. In response, administrators partnered with local homelessness support organizations to provide these students with the services that they needed.

4) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member district approached the Forum with the following questions:

- What considerations influenced contact district administrators' decision to pursue in-district charter school models?

- What challenges have contact district leaders faced in implementing and managing in-district charter schools?

    o   How have leaders overcome these challenges?

- How do district leaders and in-district charter school administrators divide management responsibilities?

    o   How do the various stakeholders involved in in-district charter school management successfully coordinate school services?

    o   What challenges arise with this service coordination and how do district leaders and in-district charter school leaders overcome these challenges?

- How did in-district charter schools prioritize the most promising community partners in the first two years of school operations?

    o   Which community partnerships have proven most beneficial for students' academic success?

- How do in-district charter schools involve parents/guardians in school governance?

- How do district leaders measure performance of in-district charter schools?

    o   How has the in-district charter model affected students' academic achievement?

Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed partnership school developers and administrators at both public school districts and charter schools in school systems across the United States.

A Guide to Districts Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Location	Approximate Enrollment
District A	Midwest	39,000
Institution B	Midwest	N/A
Institution C	Pacific West	14,000
School D	South	700