Charter-District Collaboration:
An Overview of National Best Practices and Options for Schools Serving Wilmington Students
July 2017

This policy brief by the Institute for Public Administration was prepared for the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission and addresses the fragmentation of public education responsibilities in the City of Wilmington and the challenges to collaboration among the schools that serve City of Wilmington[1] students. The benefits of collaboration are described and specific best practices from cities across the country are highlighted. The analysis concludes with options for the City of Wilmington, including the Commission's recommendation for the development of a collaborative compact that will strengthen capacity for the shared improvement of public education among district, charter, and vocational-technical (vo-tech) schools that serve City of Wilmington students.

Introduction

A guiding principle of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission (the Commission) is that all schools in a community share responsibility for delivering a high-quality education to all students. To achieve this shared responsibility, many cities and states actively promote collaboration. The Center on Reinventing Public Education reports, "in at least 35 urban school districts with significant numbers of charter schools, efforts are underway to jointly improve instruction, align policies, address inequities, or find operational efficiencies" (Lake, Yatsko, Gill, & Opalka, 2017). Wilmington should follow the path taken by other cities to promote collaboration.

The Need for Collaboration in Wilmington

Twenty-three separate governing units, including four traditional school districts, one vo-tech school district, and eighteen charter schools share responsibility for delivering

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1   The terms "Wilmington" and "City of Wilmington" are used interchangeably throughout this document. They refer to students residing in the City of Wilmington.

public education to approximately 11,500 City of Wilmington students. Figure 1 shows the public schools that enrolled more than 15 City of Wilmington students during the 2015–16 school year. Clearly, responsibility for public education in Wilmington is severely fragmented. Each district or charter is responsible for educating its part of Wilmington's student population, but none is responsible for improving the education of all City of Wilmington students. There is no unified plan, few examples of collaboration, and virtually no requirement to function as a coordinated public education system. While some districts and charters work together on a limited basis, there has been little ongoing collaboration among all of the units responsible for Wilmington's students. There is no established pathway to share successes, making it difficult to scale-up success to the entire public education system. Cooperation, collaboration, and shared

Figure 1: Wilmington Student Enrollment, 2015–16 School Year

School Type	Unit	Number of Students
Traditional School Districts	Red Clay Consolidated School District*	3,561
	Christina School District	2,421
	Brandywine School District	1,934
	Colonial School District	235
Vo-Tech School Districts	New Castle County Vo-Tech School District	664
Charter Schools	Edison (Thomas A.) Charter School	540
	Kuumba Academy Charter School	399
	East Side Charter School	327
	Family Foundations Academy	194
	Academia Antonia Alonso	177
	Odyssey Charter School	174
	Prestige Academy	146
	Delaware College Preparatory Academy*+	137
	The Delaware Met+	131
	Great Oaks Charter School	91
	Charter School of Wilmington*	70
	First State Montessori Academy	70
	Freire Charter School	65
	Las Américas ASPIRA Academy	48
	Delaware Design-Lab High School	38
	Delaware Academy of Public Safety and Security	31
	Gateway Lab School	25
	Delaware Military Academy*	22

Source: Delaware Department of Education Data Set, 2015–16 School Year
Notes: There are 23 units that serve more than 15 Wilmington students. Including schools that serve less than 15 Wilmington students,
*   there are 30 units serving Wilmington students as of the 2015–16 school year.*
* Charter schools authorized by Red Clay Consolidated School District are listed separately.
+ Indicates schools open for all or part of the 2015–16 school year, but closed before 2016–17 school year.

learning among schools that serve Wilmington students are the exception rather than the norm.

Dividing the task of educating students among more and more providers has not produced acceptable education outcomes. On virtually every indicator, Wilmington students perform at a lower level than their non-Wilmington peers (Wilmington Education Improvement Commission, 2017). Significant disparities exist between Wilmington students and non-Wilmington students, on academic performance, graduation rates, and drop-out rates. Similarly, low-income City of Wilmington students perform at a lower level than low-income students statewide. This trend is true for virtually all the schools that serve Wilmington students (Wilmington Education Improvement Commission, 2017).

Challenges to Collaboration

Since the 1990s, 42 states and the District of Columbia have established charter schools (National Charter School Resource Center at Safal Partners, 2015). Charter schools have led to greater flexibility and choice for students and families. They also have led to increased barriers and challenges to successful collaboration. In Delaware, specifically in Wilmington, the challenges are particularly acute. In Delaware, 90% of charters are authorized by the state outside of school districts, and they are often advocated as alternatives to traditional districts. In other states, most charter schools are authorized by school districts and they operate as an additional choice within those districts. In Delaware, from the outset, state authorized charters and traditional districts were placed in competition for enrollments

and financial resources. This distinctive barrier to collaboration has made it difficult to share successful practices and scale-up success to all schools. Indeed, competition and mistrust rather than collaboration have been typical of the relationship between charters and districts in New Castle County.

Delaware is not alone in confronting barriers to collaboration. Hanover Research suggests that hostility and contentious relationships can inhibit collaboration from occurring (2012). Additionally, a 2016 Mathematica Policy Research report on the implementation of Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grants in seven cities that signed charter-district collaboration compacts noted that "perceived structural factors, rather than lack of interest, inhibited cross-sector collaboration" in these cities (Tuttle et al., 2016). Additional barriers and challenges to collaboration nationwide include:

- **Lack of communication and commitment** among all stakeholders to find common ground, build trust, and set and achieve common goals. In addition, failure to efficiently "communicate the benefits of district-charter partnerships to the public" to create bottom-up support (Yatsko, Cooley Nelson, & Lake, 2013).

- **Lack of focused engagement** among schools and key stakeholders such as the teachers' unions, school boards, administrator associations, city leadership, and business partners.

- **Lack of sustainability** of collaboration due to factors such as leadership turnover and political barriers (Yatsko, Cooley Nelson, & Lake, 2013).

Benefits and Examples of Collaboration

Collaboration can provide sustainable benefits for all stakeholders including community members, school districts, charter schools, and especially for students. These benefits can include more streamlined systems and dissemination of information for communities, shared professional development and best practices, and reduced political tensions (Lake, Yatsko, Gill, & Opalka, 2017). For example, a collaborative compact signed by leaders of Boston district, charter, and catholic schools created the "right relational and political environment" for improved education for students (School & Main Institute, 2016).

District-charter collaboration also can support shared best practices that benefit students in all schools. At a statewide level, the Massachusetts Department of Education compiled and hosts a database shared among charter and traditional district schools on best practice models for all schools (Massachusetts Charter Public School Association, 2011 & Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education). New York City's collaborative compact started an initiative called NYC Collaborates that also helps open channels of communication and opportunities for collaboration. This initiative supports the goals of the compact through the creation and facilitation of opportunities for charter and traditional district schools to collaborate on ways to improve student achievement and share best practices (New York City Charter School Center & NYC Collaborates). Similarly, a D.C. Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force is responsible for delivering recommendations to the mayor for improved coordination across the education system (Doyle, Holly, & Hassel, 2015). Goals for this taskforce, made up of charter and district leaders, include developing methods of information sharing, improving the navigation of public school options for families, and creating a framework for facilities planning (Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, n.d.).

Many of the tangible benefits of collaboration have come to fruition in cities across the country, including reduced expenses for transportation and shared facilities. Collaboration on busing in Boston has saved Boston Public Schools an estimated $1 million annually in transportation costs (School & Main Institute, 2016). In Denver, many district facilities have been made available to high-performing charters (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).

The Boston compact funded a program to help improve teaching and instruction for English language learners and has allowed for grants to be distributed to schools that demonstrated strong academic success among male students of color (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016). The grants were used for shared instructional practice across sectors to help increase achievement for male students of color (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).

National Best Practices

Successful collaborations follow a number of models, including a charter consortium, portfolio strategies, shared professional development, and a collaborative compact. Each has its own distinctive features and advantages and some features of the best practices for collaboration may be combined.

Charter Consortium

Consortiums have been created across the nation as coalitions for supporting charter schools and the students they collectively serve. Charter consortiums can take a statewide or citywide form to encourage collaboration among charters. Some efforts include the San José Charter School

Consortium and the Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools. As the Wilmington Education Advisory Committee recommended, a citywide charter consortium among existing Wilmington charter schools could promote shared capacity, collaboration, and best practices among all schools. For example, core goals of the San José Charter School Consortium under the California Charter Schools Association are to strengthen relationships with districts, build a network of high-quality charter partners, and share best practices (California Charter Schools Association).

Portfolio Strategy

The portfolio strategy is a problem-solving approach in which "school districts manage a portfolio of diverse schools" and "hold all schools accountable for performance" (Yatsko, 2012). Developed by Center on Reinventing Public Education founder Dr. Paul Hill, components of this strategy include school autonomy, innovation, and school choice (National Charter School Resource Center at Safal Partners, 2015). In this approach, public officials and districts aim to promote continuous improvement of all schools by closely tracking school performance and holding all schools accountable for performance, regardless of whether they are district or charter schools (Hill & Campbell, 2011). A key feature of the portfolio strategy is that district leaders should remain neutral toward the entity that runs a school (district, charter, etc.) (Hill & Campbell, 2011).

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has actively promoted this strategy since 2009 through their Portfolio School Districts Project. CRPE has also established a portfolio network that includes participants from some of the over 20 cities that have implemented this approach, including New York City, Washington D.C., Denver, and New Orleans. While some

cities have seen success with this model, the portfolio strategy can be controversial and has caused conflict among education stakeholders. Judging all schools on a common accountability and performance standard can lead to school closures and alienate school leaders, community members, and teachers (Hill & Campbell, 2011).

Shared Professional Development Model

Collaborative professional development among district and charter teachers and administrators can promote the sharing of ideas and unite school leaders to solve mutual problems. The National Charter School Resource Center's District-Charter Collaboration User Guide lists shared professional development as a best practice for district and charter collaboration (National Charter School Resource Center at Safal Partners, 2015). In cities throughout the country, teachers from charters and districts participate in shared professional development opportunities; success in one school is shared in order to improve outcomes in all schools.

New York City has used a professional development model to enhance their collaboration framework. The city has implemented the District-Charter Collaborative to improve instruction through professional learning communities. Participating schools work together to improve educator practice and learning areas, such as restorative disciplinary practices, supporting English language learners, and supporting students with disabilities (New York City Department of Education, 2016).

The City of Baltimore initiated a Trauma Informed Care initiative to provide training to all city-schools employees "on how to identify and address trauma and assist in maintaining stability in communities while providing emotional supports" (City of Baltimore Public Schools, 2016).

Delaware has experience with shared professional development through what was originally the Vision 2015 network of schools that included district, charter, and vo-tech schools and offered joint professional development opportunities for teachers and school leaders.

Charter-District Compact

A charter-district compact is a voluntary agreement among schools that moves away from an environment centered on competition, and builds upon shared goals and a commitment to deliver high-quality education to all students. Collaboration compacts are backed by key educational stakeholders, such as the district superintendent, charter school leaders, city mayors, teachers' unions, and school board members (Hanover Research, 2012). Compacts are non-legislative working agreements with documents that describe explicit goals for comprehensive collaboration and outline strategies for achieving these goals.

A fundamental aspect of compacts is that stakeholders explicitly agree that all schools are committed to the success of all students and that better collaboration will enhance the experience and outcomes for all students. Compact agreements among some district and charter schools may include provisions for shared professional development or focus efforts on co-location of schools and instructional strategies (Lake, 2017).

Starting in 2010, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Gates Foundation) has fiscally supported the development of charter-district collaboration compacts (Yatsko, Cooley Nelson, and Lake 2013). According to the Gates Foundation, the compact grants go toward a city's investment in areas such as joint professional development and "creating personalized learning experiences for students" (Gates Foundation, 2012). In 2016, Mathematica Policy Research completed an evaluation of the awarded grants from December 2012 to December 2015 and found that the grant activities were perceived as having a small-scale positive impact to building cross-sector collaboration (Tuttle et al., 2016). Like other models, compacts often face challenges. As voluntary associations, they may experience disengagement from both sectors if the initial expected benefits do not materialize in a timely fashion. They also are vulnerable to turnover in the leadership of the compact and within schools (National Charter School Resource Center at Safal Partners, 2015).

Options for Delaware

Based on extensive analysis and deliberations of its committee on charter-district collaboration, the Commission recommends the creation of a compact among all schools that serve Wilmington students. The specific terms of agreement and priorities of this Wilmington compact must be determined by the participating district and charter leaders working in concert with community partners. Overall, the compact should provide a framework for shared best practices, strategies, and tools for successful collaboration among district and charter schools, tailored to fit the highest-priority needs of all schools in Wilmington. The compact should help to break down communication barriers, find common ground, and build trust, based on the mutual goal of student success. This common effort should lay the groundwork for a sustainable collaboration among public school educators and community stakeholders (city, county, and state public officials, as well as business leaders).

The Wilmington compact should encourage shared resources, shared goals for student success, and shared responsibility to provide an equitable and quality education for all students. Areas for potential collaboration include: coordinated and consolidated transportation services, recruitment and retention strategies for highly-qualified teachers, and shared professional development.

In a step toward the establishment of the Wilmington compact, Governor John Carney, Secretary of Education Susan Bunting, Wilmington Mayor Michael Purzycki, and other city leaders in collaboration with the Commission should convene all Wilmington school leaders, inclusive of district superintendents and charter directors, and support their joint development of an open and voluntary agreement that can have sustainable benefits for all students and educators as well as Delaware taxpayers.

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The Wilmington Education Improvement Commission is mandated by law to advise the Governor and General Assembly on how to improve the quality and availability of education for children P–12 within the City of Wilmington and recommend actions to address the needs of all schools statewide that have high concentrations of students in poverty, English language learners, and other students at risk.

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