
Restarting with a Charter School

Center on Innovation & Improvement

Converting schools to charter status can be an effective component of a district's portfolio of strategies for improving persistently low-achieving schools (Lake & Hill, 2009). Restarting a school as a charter school involves converting or closing an existing school and then reopening the school as a charter school. State charter school laws outline the parameters of charter school policy and practice. Depending on the relevant state charter statute, one of multiple entities (e.g., local education agencies, state education agencies, colleges and universities, mayors, appointed charter boards, and non-profits) may authorize charter schools. Consequently, the district's role related to restarting with a charter school may be as an authorizer or as a partner working closely with an alternative charter school authorizer. Factors influencing a district's ability to use the restarting with a charter school strategy include entities authorized to approve charter schools, the legal status of charter schools as independent single school districts or as part of an existing district, and the role of charter school governing boards.

Restarting with a charter school requires that district leaders, including the local school board, exercise leadership in developing, supporting, monitoring, and in some cases, approving charter schools. Research on charter school effectiveness and the experience of districts that have authorized charter schools highlights three key factors that contribute to the successful use of charter schools as an improvement strategy:

1. District leaders attend to system-level governance, including the capacity of the district to serve as a charter authorizer (CCSRI, 2009).
2. Districts articulate a clear legal relationship and a corresponding set of expectations that define the relationship between the district and the charter school, including the development of a performance-based contract that delineates the autonomy to be provided to charter schools and how schools will be held accountable (Kowal & Hassel, 2009).
3. District leaders support charter schools in accessing resources, space, and high-quality leadership and staff to meet the needs of all students (CCSRI, 2009).

State law determines the role that districts may play in authorizing and operating charter schools. In many states, state charter law allows districts to directly authorize new charter schools. District authorizers may allow charter school governing boards to operate single schools or contract with external charter management organizations (CMOs) to operate networks of schools within the district. A key success factor is the district's ability to identify and select high-quality charter school operators and to authorize and monitor charter school governing boards (CCSRI, 2009). For instance, a number of large urban districts have developed within-district "charter school offices" responsible for the administration of district charters, often as part of a portfolio approach to improving schools (Lake & Hill, 2009). Regardless of how a district chooses to authorize or manage its charter schools, research highlights the importance of a rigorous selection process that is fair, that identifies charter school developers with a research-based and proven approach to instruction, and that identifies school developers that have a solid business plan (CCSRI, 2009). The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center and the Finance Project (2006) provide criteria for assessing a prospective contractor's organizational and financial ability to perform the necessary work. Haft (2009) and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (2009) discuss the key components of a rigorous application process and what a good contract should contain. Charter school contracts will vary according to state charter school law, but samples and links to samples at Arizona State Board for Charter Schools (n.d.) and U.S. Charter Schools (n.d.) can prove helpful.

Defining expectations and relationships among the district, the charter school governance board, and individual charter schools is critical to the success of charter schools as an improvement strategy. Kowal & Hassel (2009) frame the district/charter school relationship in terms of autonomy, accountability, and resources. Autonomy over personnel decisions, resource management, and educational programs provides the flexibility needed to engage in dramatic improvement efforts. Clearly articulated outcomes based on student achievement and other measures of a school's health (e.g., fiscal, safety, leadership stability) are used to benchmark and hold

newly formed charter schools accountable for results. Large urban districts, such as Chicago, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, are using performance-based contracts to formalize a relationship between the district office and charter governing boards and CMOs that promotes dramatic improvement.

Charter school founders are often faced with difficulties in securing capital financing or finding a location for the charter school and in hiring top-quality leaders and teachers. Districts experienced in supporting charter schools as an improvement strategy have found it useful to actively support newly formed charter schools with securing space and hiring staff (for instance, Chicago's Renaissance 2010). Also, research shows that effective charter school leadership is a crucial factor in the success of newly formed charter schools (CCSRI, 2009).

Action Principles

For State

1. Address policy barriers inhibiting growth of charter schools (i.e., charter caps that limit growth and expansion, inequitable funding systems, and facilities financing challenges).
2. Draft model authorizer policies and procedures.
3. Develop model charter contracts.

For District

Attend to System-Level Governance

1. Develop the capacity (internally or externally) to effectively identify, select, and monitor charter school operators. Example: Chicago's Renaissance 2010 initiative and the Office of New Schools (<http://www.ren2010.cps.k12.il.us/>).
2. Engage parents and community members to discuss the charter school option, including the parameters of converting a school to charter status.
3. Research and prioritize charter management organizations (CMOs) that may address district needs.
4. Develop and use a rigorous selection process to identify charter school applicants.
5. Develop a databank of individuals interested in serving on charter school boards.

Articulate Legal Relationship (Autonomy, Accountability, Resources)

1. Engage stakeholder groups to identify the right mix of autonomy and flexibility to be provided to prospective charter schools and to gain support for the charter school option.
2. Clearly articulate the autonomy to be provided to newly formed charter schools.
3. Develop a set of non-negotiable performance benchmarks to serve as the basis for holding charter schools accountable.
4. Allow charter schools to propose school-based performance benchmarks to supplement district and state required performance benchmarks.
5. Develop a template for performance-based contracting.
6. Outline clear and enforceable consequences for failing to meet goals (e.g., revoke or modify charter, replace management organization).

Develop Mechanisms to Support Newly Formed Charter Schools

1. Support schools with finding sites and funding for startups.
2. Cultivate a pipeline of charter governing board members and charter school leaders.
3. Empower teachers to overcome resistance to the strategy.

References and Resources

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