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Charting New Territory

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

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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.¹

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.²

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.³

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.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶

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.⁷

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.

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