Quality for All
The Rise of Independent Authorizing and
the Two Promises of the Charter School Movement

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I dedicate this thesis to my mentor and friend

Pedro A. Ramos

Thank you for taking me under your wing,
for teaching me what true leadership looks like,
and for showing me the value and meaning of public service.
“No man is an island.”
- John Donne

This work product is the culmination of a seven-month research and writing process that I could not have endured without the support of many, many others.

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“We’ve tried, but we just cannot get in anywhere,” he said. His tone was mild, but the hopeless look in his eyes betrayed his otherwise neutral demeanor. It was the summer of 2012 and I was in a taxicab headed to the Philadelphia International Airport. At that moment, my journey to fly out of the city was perhaps an apt symbol for the mass of families who have fled the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) over the past decade due to chronic underperformance in the city’s public schools. The driver was describing to me the process of trying to enroll his son into one of the city’s 86 charter schools. He asked me if I knew any reputable charters that were still taking students. I ticked off a few examples. Independence Charter? Nope. Folk Arts Cultural Treasures? Filled up. I asked him about sending his child to a neighborhood school option. “No, no, it is absolutely no good,” he shook his head three times, once for each emphatic “no.” Like so many, he had given up on the traditional public school system.

Across the country, charter schools, which are privately run but publically funded schools, have sprung up in response to the existence of persistently low performing school districts, largely in urban areas. The charter movement was founded with a dual promise. The first was to create a system of high-quality charter school options for families. Because charters are designed to trade autonomy for accountability, they are free from many regulations that govern traditional public schools and are able to make staffing decisions at-will, extend or modify the school day, and experiment with innovative curriculum and learning styles, among possible reforms. In return for such flexibility, the central idea behind charters is that they would be held accountable largely by market forces and families who would choose better charters over failing ones, resulting in a high-quality marketplace for education (Osborne, 12). The second promise was that charters, as high-performing educational options, would motivate improvement
in traditional districts through competition in the marketplace and cooperation over shared best practices. However, the sector has fallen short of both promises, with uneven performance across the charter spectrum (CREDO, 2).

The issue of charter school quality is the largest issue facing the movement. In an effort to remedy this, advocates are focusing even more heavily on strengthening accountability within their sector (Ibid) To restore quality to charters, advocates have moved away from the market-based accountability mechanisms that founded their movement and towards authorizer accountability instead (Gau). Authorizers are the governing structures that approve, monitor, renew, and close charter schools. As the term suggests, they “authorize” a school’s right to exist through the charter’s contract and are supposed to provide general oversight and support as well. Traditionally, these actors have been local school boards themselves. However, advocates now contend that local districts lack the desire, political insulation, and resources to authorize effectively and design structures that can hold schools accountable. Instead, advocates believe “independent” authorizing bodies, such as an independent charter authorizing board, nonprofit, or university, can do a much better job at overseeing charters. This shift of power moves control away from traditional school districts and establishes the core belief of advocates that quality independent authorizing will equal quality charter schools (Ibid). Supporters of charter schools are indeed betting that these new authorizing structures will allow their movement to reach the first promise of a high-quality sector.

For the second promise to be achieved, there must be cooperation and collaboration between charter and traditional schools, so that the best practices of the former may be leveraged for the benefit of the latter. However, instead of co-existing, charter advocates and traditionalists, who are defenders of school districts, are fighting, turning a debate over innovation in schools
into what some believe to be a war for the future of public education in this country. The fast growth of charter schools, disagreements and instability because to inadequate funding streams, and the inability of school districts to be effective authorizers have all combined to generate tension between advocates and traditionalists. The shift towards independent authorizing may in fact lead to better charter schools. However, as evidenced in cities like Philadelphia, it can also potentially bring about unfettered charter expansion, chip away at local control for districts, and ultimately threaten the survival of traditional schools themselves. Co-existence between charters and districts is still a goal that may become even more challenging to reach with independent authorizing structures.

In this thesis, I explore whether there are structures and practices of educational governance that can enable the formation of a high-quality charter sector and create conditions where both school districts and charters can not only co-exist but also thrive together. In other words, can a system be created where the two promises of the charter movement are finally met? I attempt to find out by exploring three comparative case studies in urban districts starting in Philadelphia, where the local district is attempting to establish itself as a quality authorizer after years of missteps, while also facing down the prospect of independent authorizing stripping it of local control. I also bring in the examples of Washington D.C. and Atlanta, two cities that have moved towards independent authorizing, but with very different results. Together, the lessons from these case studies can hopefully inform the future work of both advocates and traditionalists as our country attempts to ensure greater educational opportunities for all.

**A Roadmap**

This thesis is divided into three parts and eight sections. In the first part, I describe the two promises of the charter movement and the shift in focus to independent authorizing. I begin
in the first section by showing how the charter movement began with the dual promise to create a
system of quality charter schools and improve traditional public schools through market forces.

In the second section, I evaluate the progress of the charter movement in meeting these
dual promises, ultimately arguing that advocates have fallen short. With the first promise,
charters have been shown to only have been marginally better (or worse) than traditional schools
and perhaps are not meeting the needs of all public schoolchildren, especially those with special
needs, an affirmation of the failures of market accountability. On the second promise,
traditionalists see their relationship with charter supporters as a zero-sum game, with both sides
scrambling for resources and finances at the expense of one another.

Section three explains that in an attempt to restore the promise of quality in their sector,
advocates are advocating for new, independent authorizers for charter schools, shifting the
governing structures of charters away from local school districts, which advocates believe lack
the desire, political insulation, and resources to authorize well (Palmer, 305-306). But as section
four will explain, charter proponents are potentially neglecting their second promise of quality
and cooperation in the traditional sector with a focus on independent authorizing and the
chipping away of local control. Traditionalists assert that this chipping away of local control is
an abuse on not only school districts, but also on the foundation of democracy itself.

Part two examines a trio of case studies, testing for urban district’s progress in meeting
the two promises. In section five, I dive specifically into the Philadelphia context, evaluating the
city’s school district as a poor authorizer, resulting in a charter sector that has a large variance in
performance and offers few high-quality options for families. I also outline the tensions inherent
in district-charter relations due to years of poor authorizing and a strained funding system that
pits traditional and charter schools against one another in a zero-sum war for resources. It is
evident that district and charter schools in the city have little interest in working together or helping one another improve. I then show how a Senate bill that calls for independent authorizing could deepen the hostility between both sectors and lead to the collapse of the school district, forever eliminating the second promise from being fulfilled in the city.

I then turn to two case studies of cities that have experienced advocates’ shift towards independent authorizing models with opposite results. As told in section six, in the nation’s capitol, the D.C. Public Charter School Board, an Independent Chartering Board (ICB), is the sole manager of the city’s charter schools. D.C. has a reputation as a strong authorizer that holds schools accountable because its abundant resources and large staff allow it to establish systems that set clear expectations for charters. It also manages a positive relationship with the traditional school district by keeping communication lines open and offering to collaborate on sensitive issues like access and equity. The results are an improving system of schools, with charters especially taking off as institutions of quality.

Section seven is a case study of Atlanta Public Schools (APS), which recently approved an ICB at the state level. However, because of the preservation of strong local control mechanisms for authorizing and a funding formula that protects local revenues, charter quality and the traditionalist-advocates’ relationship is stronger at APS than at the state level, where tensions over politics and funding have combined to create an atmosphere unfit for authorizing. Atlanta is a standout case where the district authorizer seems to be producing better results than the independent one.

Finally, in section eight, I outline lessons learned on how future educational governing arrangements can be structured so they enable quality in the charter sector and cooperation and improvement among traditional schools. Lesson number one is that strong governing oversight
through authorizers is absolutely critical to charter accountability. Advocates were correct to shift away from the market. As the D.C. case proves, it takes the force of a governing body to fully ensure quality in the sector and close low-performers.

Lesson two, in evaluating what makes a good authorizer, is that among advocates’ three criteria, resources are the most critical. In fact, resources can be said to be the bedrock of authorizing. Quality oversight simply cannot occur without an authorizing body crossing a threshold of adequate resources.

Lesson three is how integral communication is to the fulfillment of both promises. For charters, clear communication means defined expectations for the school and the sharing of best practices. And for the relationship between charters and traditional schools, dialogue is an important foundation for cooperation and problem solving.

The final two lessons deal with more heavily on the second promise. Lesson four stresses the essentiality of clear and adequate streams of funding for both school sectors, but especially districts, to minimize conflict. Local control of resources is important, but even more essential is whether there is enough of it in the first place. Lesson five is that districts cannot use charter schools as an excuse for their own woes. Responsibility ultimately lies with districts themselves to improve their own schools, regardless of charter performance, if they are to draw families back into the traditional sector.
| PART ONE |
Declaring Independence
- Section One -

*The Two Promises: A History of the Chartered School*

It was former teacher and principal Ray Budde who first proposed the concept of an autonomous school, free from the old, top-down district model. His 1974 paper for the Society of General Systems Research, “Education by Charter” imagined reorganizing existing schools to be led by teachers who would be bound by a contract, which could also be called a “charter” (Korderie, 1). After years of the paper collecting dust, unnoticed by the education world, he resubmitted it in 1988 to the Northeast Regional Lab. This time, Budde’s idea would almost immediately gain traction and be expanded on by American Federation of Teachers President Al Shanker, who proposed that teachers be allowed to start *new* public schools called charter schools (Ibid).

Budde had envisioned that “groups of teachers would receive education charters” from school boards (Ibid). The Citizens League in Minnesota, a progressive think tank, similarly proposed in 1990 that school boards would become the overseers - or authorizers - for schools that sprouted from a new charter concept (Ibid, 2). Though the state would hold some power as well, primary authorizing was to be handled at the local district level by school boards. In 1990, Minnesota became the first state to pass a state charter law and give birth to a “charter school.”

**Subsection A: The Marketplace**

Progressive educators brought charter schools to its practical forms. But in the early twentieth century, elements of the charter concept found a home within the school choice movement, which can trace its roots to the more conservative theories of free market champion Milton Friedman. Friedman was among the first to recommend that the “financing of education be separated from the administration of schools, the core idea behind school vouchers” (Kane). And in 1955, he “argued that there is no need for government to run schools” and that instead
there should be “competition among schools vying to attract students,” which would improve quality (Ibid). In their groundbreaking 1990 book, *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools*, John Chubb and Terry Moe asserted that a market system would prevail over the incumbent one because, echoing Friedman and conservative icon Ronald Reagan, “government has not solved the education problem because government is the problem” (Chubb and Moe, ix). By referencing “government,” these scholars are addressing the “institutions of direct democratic control” that exist mostly in the form of school boards in local school districts (Ibid, 2). For many supporters of choice, local bureaucracy is an impediment to effective education reforms. As Paul Hill and Robin Lake explain in a 2002 *Brookings Institution* report, there exists “widespread dissatisfaction with elected officials as the sole principal for public schools” (Hill and Lake, 7). Elected bodies “constantly impose new rules in response to political pressure and legislative negotiations” and state governments blanket policies to entire districts without taking into account diverse needs of individual schools (Hill and Lake, 7). Overly bureaucratic school boards are therefore shortchanging students and responsible for the academic failures that result from the stifling of educational innovation. Local government, it seems, is not local enough.

Where power should lie, then, is within the schools themselves. And there is no better catalyst for such an idea than that of a chartered school. Chubb and Moe contend that “any group or organization” that is fit to run a school should be allowed to charter a public school and “granted the right to accept students and receive public money” (Chubb and Moe, 219). They even declare charter schools “a self-contained reform…[with] the capacity all by itself to bring about the kind of transformation that, for years, reformers have been seeking to engineer” (Ibid, 217). Researcher Kathleen McGree calls charters “the first real model for true decentralization and autonomy within the public schools” and also “part of a broader movement toward
deregulation and the decentralization of decision-making authority to the…school levels” (McGree, 10).

**Subsection B: Parent Power**

The key stakeholders and drivers of change in early charter school thinking were parents. Through market accountability structures, driven by parental and family choice, the charter sector would be self-regulating. As Mark H. Blitz illustrates in the *Journal of School Choice*, charters “gain sustainability through…consistent attendance and parent approval, or, in marketing terms, customer satisfaction” (Blitz, 364). Each school is therefore “held accountable to market forces, namely the families who choose their schools” (Ibid). Competition, as a result, ensures self-regulated quality. Accountability “is propelled mostly by public marketplaces in which a school’s clients and stakeholders reward its successes, punish its failures, and send it signals about what needs to change” (Finn, Manno, and Vanourek, 127). So if schools fail “to attract and retain customers…they risk closure on their own, without external assessment and accountability” (Blitz, 357). In the traditional district model, parents (as the “customers”) can hold schools accountable only by “voting in elections and by petitioning officials for changes” but cannot rule directly on policies set by elected bureaucrats (Hill and Lake, 6). With charters, parents can “vote with their feet” and usher in a new age of parent-driven accountability through market forces (Garn, 571).

Conservative scholars Chester E. Finn, Jr., Bruno Manno, and Gregg Vanourek argue in a 2001 book, *Charter Schools in Action*, that accountability is dependent upon an abundance of information. Instead of the “typical form of school accountability [which] depends on rules and compliance,” Finn and his colleagues advocate for “accountability-via-transparency” where “so much is known about each school that various watchers and constituents…can and routinely do
‘regulate’ it through market-style mechanisms rather than command-and-control structures” (Finn, Manno, and Vanourek, 128). Calling for “Generally Accepted Accountability Principles for Education (GAAPE),” akin to similar principles in financial accounting, the authors place the burden on schools to “routinely and systematically disclose…complete and accurate information about their programs, performance, organizations, and finances” (Ibid, 141). Authorizers are only called on to disclose basic information regarding school approval, monitoring, intervention, and renewal procedures, but largely defer to and depend on the information from the schools themselves (Ibid, 143). This vision endorses a limited role for authorizing entities, preferring to have what I call a lax authorizer that largely stays hands-off and allows the market to do the work.

Gregg Garn, in an October 2001 Education Administration Quarterly piece, largely agrees on the “importance of reliable product information” (Garn, 593). He envisions a straightforward role for authorizing agencies and state actors in “capturing and distributing uniform dependable performance data [from schools] that would encourage more informed consumer choices” (Ibid, 594). Authorizers would be charged with ensuring the accuracy of information and that parents have access to such data. Garn compares choosing a school to “buying a car” - one would not want to do either, he surmises, without “accurate safety, quality, and performance data” (Ibid, 596). Sponsors of market accountability have indeed held true to the charter movement’s founding roots through weak governmental guidance and strong parent-market empowerment.

**Subsection C: The Promises**

Entrusted with power by the market and armed with information, parents themselves will move the market and favor quality charter options, fulfilling the two promises of the charter
movement. First, **a system of high-quality charter schools would be created** where, like in any business industry, great schools will remain open while poor ones will lose customers and close down. Parents would control “the entry and exit of schools in the educational marketplace by increasing or decreasing demand” (Blanton, 23).

However, the charter movement has a **second promise**: to **raise the quality of traditional public schools** as well. As parents “vote with their feet,” they would also “force both district and charter schools to improve, thus creating a system of high-performing public schools” for all (Garn, 571). With quality charter schools in the marketplace, there would be “competitive pressure to stimulate improvement in conventional public schools” (Blanton, 5). In addition, charters would be an example for traditional schools. Free from bureaucracy, including regulations on curriculum and school day/year length, charter schools “would…experiment and then pass along their practices to all schools” in the traditional sector (Butrymowicz). This dual promise of a quality system of public charter schools, which would also spur quality in the traditional sector, is the core argument of the charter movement. These are lofty promises. But charter advocates, hungry for reform, expect nothing less from their movement. The goal of charter schools, says Debroah Kenny, the CEO of Harlem Village Academies, “has always been to fundamentally transform public education in this country” (Kenny).
Charter schools certainly have proliferated to become a large enough sector and force in the education reform realm to justify an evaluation of its progress. The swift ascent of Ray Budde’s idea in the United States has been nothing short of astounding. In 2013, there were nearly 6,000 charter schools across the country, enrolling more than 2.3 million students in the 2012 – 2013 school year (See Figure A) (CREDO, 1) (“The Public Charter School Dashboard”). From the birth of the movement in the 1990s until today, there has been consistent, upward trending growth, with new schools opening up every single year. In fact, the percentage of charter school students to all public school students is now at an impressive 27.7%, according to data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (“The Public Charter School Dashboard”).

**Figure A**

**Total Number of Charter Schools (Nationwide)**

Much of the charter phenomenon, though, is seen in cities. Urban areas are host to a
disproportionally large number of charters. In the 2005-2006 school year, 1,943 city charters were educating 26,877 children (Ibid). At this time, 52.7% of charters were in cities, compared to 24.5% in suburban-defined areas (Ibid). By the 2010-2011 school year, however, there were 2,923 urban charter schools serving 55,031 students (Ibid). By this time, cities had gained in its charter “market share” – up to 55.6% – while suburbia had declined in its share to 20.9% (Ibid).

**Figure B**

Charter Growth By Geographic Context (Total Number)

**Figure C**

Charter Growth By Geographic Context (Percentage)
Demographically, charters are predominantly black, with high aggregate numbers of Hispanic and white students as well. In the 2006-2007 term, they were educating 18,209 black students (66.2% of the total), 3,468 Hispanic students (12.6%), and 5,088 white students (18.5%) (Ibid). In 2011-2012, the numbers for African American students stayed largely consistent, while charters nationwide enrolled a higher percentage of Hispanic students compared to five years ago and the share of white students dropped. That year, America’s charter schools educated 30,629 blacks (65.1%), 7,579 Hispanics (16.1%) and 6,760 whites (14.4) (Ibid).

Subsection B: Evaluating The First Promise

Today, even with an impressively expanding collection of 6,000 schools, America’s charters have not met the high expectations first placed on them twenty-four years earlier. The sector has fallen short of its first promise of a vast network of high-quality school options for America’s students.

Broad academic studies have consistently found the record on charters in general to be mixed, another affirmation that parents have not been effective “voters” with their feet to help charters achieve quality across the board. In 2003, 2005, 2007, and 2009, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found “very little performance difference” between charter and traditional public schools (Ravitch 2010). Stanford University’s Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) released a report in 2006 on charter schools that found nearly “half of the charter schools nationwide [to] have results that are no different from…local public school options” and that thirty-seven percent of charters “deliver learning results that are significantly worse than their students would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools” (CREDO, 1). It is “unmistakable…that, in the aggregate, charter students are not faring as well as their [traditional public school] counterparts” (Ibid, 6). And strikingly, students
who are not considered impoverished or English Language Learners “on average do notably worse than the same students who remain in the traditional public school system” (Ibid, 7).

In 2013, CREDO released a highly anticipated National Charter School Study that discovered improvement in math and reading among charters nationwide. Charter schools “now advance the learning gains of their students’ more than traditional public schools in reading” and are now “comparable” in math (Cremata et al., 3). Even so, “charter school quality is uneven across the states and across schools” (Ibid). And “more work is needed” for charters to meet the promise of their ambitious movement (Ibid, 87).

Charter schools have also been critiqued for not meeting the promise of education for all children. In June of 2012, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that charters nationwide “enrolled a lower percentage of students with disabilities than traditional public schools” (Government Accountability Office). The GAO report discovered that “approximately 11 percent of students enrolled in traditional public schools were students with disabilities compared to about 8 percent of students enrolled in charter schools” (Ibid). And in a relative comparison with traditional schools, the “proportion of charter schools that enrolled high percentages of students with disabilities was lower overall” with “students with disabilities represented 8 to 12 percent of all students at 23 percent of charter schools compared to 34 percent of traditional public schools” (Ibid). This led to the GAO’s assumption that “some charter schools may be discouraging students with disabilities from enrolling” (Ibid).

On this note, charter schools, as public entities funded by public money, are “legally forbidden from using discriminatory enrollment policies and practices” (Herold). However, in Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Public School Notebook found that less than a third of the city’s charter schools in 2012 offered applications in a language other than English (Ibid). To add, in a
school district internal analysis, many charters were found to have erected “significant barriers to entry” (Ibid). This means schools asking for student grades before making an admissions decision, not holding a mandatory lottery, limiting sign-up opportunities to certain times, requiring parents show up in person to enroll their child, holding student and parent interview sessions, and asking if students have learning disabilities or speak English as a second language, among many barriers - which are all illegal. With uneven performance across the sector and indications that public charters are not serving all who qualify for a public education, the promise of a high-quality charter sector still seems far out of reach.

**Subsection C: Evaluating The Second Promise**

Charter advocates believed that presence of new, autonomous schools of great quality would challenge traditional public schools to improve as well. However, the present dynamic between many in the charter and traditional sector nationwide is not merely competitive – it is openly hostile. The movement for charter schools, a mechanism for innovation in public education, has instead sparked a war for the future of public education. Local district-charter relations “are as combative today as they have ever been,” writes the *Center for Reinventing Public Education* in 2013 (Lake, Nelson, Yatsko, 2). The center cites instances of anti-charter activists storming the New Jersey Department of Education and a California school district banning charter students from taking part in a district college scholarship program (Ibid). In New York City, newly inaugurated mayor Bill de Blasio is, what the *New York Times* describes as, “locked in combat” with charter operators such as Eva S. Moskowitz, the fiery head of Success Academy charter schools (Baker and Hernandez). In an election campaign in which he branded himself as a defender of public education, Mayor de Blasio “took aim at charter schools, saying they had a ‘destructive impact’ on traditional schools” and has promised to “charge rent to well-
financed charter schools,” which has triggered massive protests in America’s largest school district (Ibid).

As New York’s situation over rent alludes to, much of the tension between the two sectors lies on the financial end. For the most part, charter and traditional schools compete for the same population of students. Though charter financial formulas differ state-by-state, the most basic explanation of funding is that “money follows the child.” If a student moves from a district-run school to a charter-run one, the school district as a whole “loses” the funding tied to that child, which must now go to the charter (Dworetzky). When a district sees a student make the move to a charter, it must shed costs. But Governing Magazine’s Chris Kardish explains that although in theory, a student moving to a charter school should be “a wash” because the school district is no longer educating that child, “the reality is that traditional public schools face obstacles to reducing staff or making serious operational changes because of collective-bargaining agreements and the difficulty of closing underutilized schools” (Kardish). Because there are so many “fixed” costs tied to school districts, making up the budget gap left behind by even a few students is a challenge.

As Ralph E. Shaffer, Professor Emeritus of History at Cal Poly Pomona, explains in the Los Angeles Times in 2009, the Los Angeles Unified School District loses “nearly $7,000 in state money for each student who transfers to a charter” (Shaffer). This translates, with more than 50,000 LAUSD students in chartered schools, into an additional cost of $350 million per year for the district (Ibid). Across California, “charters are responsible for about $1.5 billion in per-pupil revenue lost to school districts” (Ibid). But it is not just the Golden State that is feeling negatively towards charter schools because of financial considerations. Kardish cites a 2013 Moody’s report argued that in urban centers, the “growth of charter schools is choking public
resources and hurting their credit ratings” (Kardish). The Nashville, Tennessee school board argued in 2013 that it cannot “afford to keep adding more charter schools” because expansion is “unsustainable and is hollowing out traditional public schools” of resources” (Potter). Innovation Ohio found in February 2013 that “the way that charter schools are funded in [Ohio] has a profoundly negative impact on the resources that remain for the overwhelming majority of kids…who stay in [the state’s] traditional public schools” (“Unfair Funding,” 1). Specifically, because of “the $774 million deducted from traditional public schools in FY 2012 to fund charters, children in traditional public schools received, on average, $235 (or 6.5%) less state aid than the state itself said they needed” (Ibid).

Back in New York, the issue of co-location, where charters share public space with traditional schools in the same building, is just as controversial as rent. Co-location literally forces two populations to co-exist in the same space (Wrobel). Charter schools, which can add resources through philanthropic or private dollars, sometimes are able to provide services and programs to its students that the traditional schoolchildren do not have access to, creating “visible disparities, division, and tension” among students and staff (Ibid). The New Orleans Tribune reports of “arts class [and] many other successful programs like robotics and music [that have been] shuttered to make room for the charter schools” in co-located Louisiana schools (Ibid). Parents, too, “have complained that traditional public school students at some schools are [forced] into shorter playground periods, shorter library hours, and earlier lunch schedules to better accommodate students enrolled at the co-located charter school” (Ibid). In Ohio, the issue extends to transportation. By law, “traditional public schools must pay the transportation costs for all children in a district, including those who attend charters,” giving the impression that some are receiving a free ride (“Unfair Funding,” 2).
Some advocates may contend that such tension is an inevitable product of the competition that charter schools foster by design. This tension, however, has spurred real conflict instead of an environment where both sectors are competitively challenging and improving one another. For many defenders of public education, the charter fight has become a zero-sum war. If a charter school “wins” by gaining a student or winning space in a public building, then it is assumed that the traditional sector “loses.” Charters have not only failed to spur improvement in traditional schools, they have set off a fight between the two sectors over power and control, with attention highly paid on finances and resources. This hostile educational environment is an affirmation that the second promise of the charter movement has surely not been met.

**Figure D**

![POLL](image)

A real poll on the liberal blog DailyKos on the charter school debate (Madhaus). This is a striking example of the charged rhetoric used in what many believe is a struggle for the soul of public education.
- Section Three -

*Enter Independent Authorizing*

It seems as if market accountability measures have simply failed to enable quality charter schooling, leading advocates to shift away from the market forces and towards authorizers as the vehicle of accountability. Rebecca Blanton of the California State Library uses Albert Hirschman’s classic theory of “Exit, Voice, and Loyalty” to illustrate why parents, as the primary market actors, may not be sufficient regulators (Hirschman, 4). As the theory goes, when faced with “an unsatisfactory condition,” an individual can choose to “exercise [his] exit option and no longer participate with the undesirable situation” (Blanton, 15). Market accountability for charter schools is heavily reliant on exit, as it is suggested that when parents pull their kids out of a school, charter leaders will be “impelled to search for ways and means to correct whatever faults have led to exit” (Hirschman, 4). Yet, parents incur “transaction costs” when considering exit because they must “invest time and energy to seek out an alternative school” and are removing their children “from a familiar setting where the student has established relationships” (Blanton, 16). There are also “barriers to exit” that make pulling a child out rather difficult, such as the lack of better alternatives to transfer into. In Philadelphia, “there simply are not enough high-quality options for families,” says a school district staffer (District Staffer 1 2014). Therefore, parents are likely to favor stability – and hold their children in what authorizers may deem a low-quality charter school – because of these barriers and transaction costs. This is especially true when authorizers are not active in making it clear to the operator and to families that a school is low performing. Parents and school officials “may not see the accumulating record of school problems” or understand if a school is considered underperforming if there is a “lack of transparency” from the authorizer; this may lead “to surprises when the boom must be lowered” and a school is recommended for closure (“State of Charter, 19). When questioned by
the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) about the “barriers to closing a failing charter school,” authorizers most commonly pointed to “parent and community support for the failing school” (Ibid, 16). Now, even advocacy organizations such as NACSA see parents as a possible barrier to effective reform, affirming Blanton’s assertions that parents will find it hard pressed to exit a failing environment. This is certainly a far cry from trusting parents to “vote with their feet.” As a result, advocates have increasingly found market mechanisms insufficient for accountability.

The shortcomings of market accountability have opened up a serious threat to the charter sector as a whole: the existence of too many low-quality charter options. This “problem of quality is the most pressing issue that charter schools…face” (CREDO, 6). In order to restore order to their educational movement, charter supporters are focusing their attention on their first promise: establishing high-quality charter schools. But in order to set the conditions for quality chartering, advocates are turning not to schools themselves, but instead to the structures of charter governance for answers. With market structures having proven to not translate into charter success, advocates have expressed “the need for other forms of charter oversight” to meet the promises of their movement (Ibid, 18).

This means that the onus of accountability now falls onto charter school authorizers. The reign of the “lax authorizer” and market-driven accountability is over. Today, authorizing bodies, not markets, have taken on a more meaningful role in the ongoing growth of the sector. As Rebecca Gau of the Fordham Institute, a conservative educational think tank, wrote in May 2006, “policymakers and researchers are recognizing that quality charter schools depend on quality charter school authorizing” (Gau, vi). Although traditionally wary of powerful oversight institutions, conservative Chester E. Finn sees an active role for authorizers in “fostering quality
schools via purposeful creation and replication” (Ibid, vii). Gau and Finn, on the political right, are not alone in their newfound belief that “quality” charters depend on “quality” authorizing. On the opposite side of the aisle, David Osborne of the Progressive Policy Institute agrees that the “key to quality in the charter sector is quality authorizing” (Osborne, 2). But in order to promote new forms of “quality authorizing,” advocates subsequently are taking aim at the old authorizing guard: school boards. As the performance of charters nationwide has been challenged, so has the role of the district authorizers supervising them. Advocates have adopted the view that quality authorizing depends on authorizers that are specifically non-district in type. Or, in other words, it is now argued that quality authorizing cannot be found on a local school board.

Subsection A: Losing Trust of School Boards

For generations, local school boards have been the governing backbone of public education in the United States of America. However, advocates now strongly believe that school districts are not the proper authorizers to enable quality in the charter sphere. Local school boards, which are also known as Local Education Agencies (LEAs), were the original authorizing bodies when charter laws were first codified into state laws. And they still count for upwards of 90% of all authorizers and oversee 52% of all charters (“State of Charter,” 3).

But local districts are simply not viewed as effective authorizers in the eyes of advocates looking for mechanisms to improve charter quality. In 2007, Louann Bierlein Palmer of Western Michigan University set three key criteria for quality authorizing that, in theory, will lead to better charter schools: a desire to be an authorizer, to be “relatively insulated” from politics, and the “ability to develop infrastructure” that is contingent on resources (Palmer, 305). Review of the literature by advocates reveals a shared distrust of school board authorizers and criticism of them based on these criteria.
Desire

On desire, local actors are seen as hostile to charter schools. In an overall sense, this “desire” criterion seems to be measured more by advocates’ subjective views on school boards and other authorizers than by any structured guidelines. Still, the University of Minnesota’s Molly McGraw draws the conclusion that some school boards have “absolute and unconditional animosity” with granting charters and have developed a “not in my backyard mindset” that discriminates against quality applicants (McGraw, 3). Some see the competitive paradox of a school district authorizing charter schools as “like a Burger King opening up inside a McDonald’s” (Nagourney 2014). “No public school wants charters to succeed,” says Andy Charrier, a Minnesota-based educator who has worked in both sectors, because public school administrators see “them as a referendum on their ability to run a district while teachers see them as a union-busting threat to their own livelihood” (Charrier 2014). Joey Gustafon of Education Next calls authorizing a “sideline activity” for school districts because of their wide array of commitments (Gustafon). This is especially true for smaller districts, where research from Gau has found that they “frequently neglect their obligations” (Gau, ix).

Political Insulation

Local boards, being democratically elected, are “susceptible to political pressure” (Palmer, 305). Public institutions “by their very nature are subject to political instability and funding swings brought on by changes in leadership in the form of a new mayor, governor, or district superintendent” (McGraw, 2). Quality authorizing work “often means making tough decisions, such as granting a charter over the objections of a teacher union or terminating one over the objections of parents” - and there is belief that local agencies simply cannot withstand such pressures (Palmer, 305).
One of the core functions of authorizing, in addition to the opening and monitoring of schools, is the closing of charters, which can be an extremely politicized decision. An authorizer’s ability to withstand political pressure and shut down a “failing” charter is key to maintaining standards of quality. From 1990 to 2012, charter schools had a 15 percent closure rate (Consoletti, 6). According to the Center for Education Reform, 41.7% of charters that close do so because of financial woes, 24% for “mismanagement,” and 18.6% for academic matters (Ibid, 8). This means that when looking at the entire charter sector, accounting for all schools that have ever been opened, only 3% of schools overall have been shuttered because of academic reasons (Resmovits). As Gary Miron, a Western Michigan University Professor who has been an early studier of charter trends, asserts, "What's fascinating about charter schools is we've had it for two decades now. I remember ten years ago, people were saying, 'now we're going to get serious, we're going to start closing bad-performing schools,” but instead, “we're seeing the same thing. I thought that was a given: these poor performing schools aren't supposed to be able to continue" (Ibid). In the 2012-2013 school year, the trend continued, with just 12.9% of renewal decisions resulted in closure (“State of Charter,” 15).

Further review of history reveals that authorizers have not become more willing to hold schools accountable through non-renewal. NACSA finds a “surprisingly large number of authorizers” that do not seem to take the duties of closing schools seriously (“State of Charter,” 18). A NACSA survey finds that 34% of all authorizers “lack an established policy to close underperforming schools” due to a lack of clear performance metrics or closure guidelines (Ibid). Public Impact notes that 70% of authorizers defer to the schools themselves in defining expectations for renewal (Batdorff and Hassel, 12). The ability to look past political ramifications and relationships to shutter a failing charter is a key component to effective
authorizing – and one of the reasons advocates believe traditional school boards are too political to authorize well.

**Authorizer Resources**

Authorizers specifically more focused on overseeing charter schools are supposedly more able to direct *resources* to the effort, as opposed to districts that have a lot more functions on their plate (McGraw, 32). Across the board, school board authorizers have been found to lack accountability systems to “measure progress…and make a careful decision” on chartering questions (Batdorff and Hassel, iii). A large burden of blame for this can be put on inadequate staffing levels at school board authorizers. This lack of capacity at the local level leads to the absence of oversight and accountability systems – and as a result, poor charter quality (Gustafon). NACSA believes that “a good authorizer needs at least five to six staff members for a portfolio of 50 to 70 schools” (Ibid). Only by having personnel can an authorizer carry out authorizing-related tasks and ensure quality control of the schools in the portfolio.

“With so many authorizers neglecting their fundamental duties,” Gau writes, “legislators are surely better off giving the job to organizations that want it and show evidence of knowing what it means to do it well” (Gau, ix). Clearly, these organizations, according to charter school advocates and scholars, are not local school boards.

**Subsection B: Meet the Independents**

Advocates contend that new “independent” authorizing entities that either supplant or supplement the authorizing functions of local boards can simply be more effective at ensuring a quality charter sector. And because scholars have argued that they better fit Palmer’s three criteria for quality authorizing (Desire, Political Insulation, Resources), they will be able to lift charter school quality and meet the high expectations of the movement. Nationwide, there are
three primary independent authorizing models that are detailed below: Independent Commissions, Higher Education Institutions, and Nonprofit Boards. It is key to note that there are no clear-cut sub-schools of thought here. Scholars support differing types of independent authorizers and there is also overlap in support of multiple entities. However, no matter the type of authority supported, advocates share a concern in placing power in the hands of independent actors further away from local school boards, and believe that these governing models will lead to better quality charter school options for children based on Palmer’s measurements of quality.

**Independent Boards and Commissions**

Independent Chartering Boards, or ICBs, are actors that operate separately from the educational establishment - and whose *only* function is to authorize and monitor charter schools. ICBs are NACSA’s “preferred [and] recommended structure for authorizing” (“Creating Independent Chartering,” 1). There has been “steady growth” in ICBs nationwide, from three in 2006 to 13 in 2012 (“State of Charter,” 4).

**On Desire**

Palmer finds that these boards are “more likely than other authorizers to have the interest, knowledge, and ‘will’ to take chartering seriously” (Palmer, 305). After all, as actors largely or even solely dedicated to charter schools, they are naturally more inclined to have a desire to authorize and carry out the function with positive intentions.

**On Political Insulation**

ICBs have only “moderate political insulation” because “the members of the boards are generally appointed by elected officials” and so “they reflect the political views of the officials who appoint them and are subject to a degree of political influence” no matter the safeguards, such as the ones recommended above (Ibid, 306). This is why NACSA recommends a mix of
appointees from both legislative and executive bodies, a diverse representation of political parties and views, staggered appointments to prevent mass turnover, and term limits (“Creating Independent Chartering,” 2).

On Resources

Independent boards can be well resourced and have been found to be extremely strong “in their focus on and use of data, in both the charter application and renewal processes” (Gau, 18). Therefore, these boards “can focus exclusively on high-quality authorizing practices and decisions” (Palmer, 305). But “adequate, dependable funding [can be] a problem for [state-level ICBs]” because “they must often rely on direct annual state appropriations, which are certainly subject to changes in the political and economic winds” (Palmer, 306). By nature, governmental bodies like ICBs can also become “cut off from what’s happening ‘on the ground’” and do a poor job of “soliciting parent and community input” (Gau, 18).

In slight opposition, Alison Consoletti and Jeanne Allen stand against ICBs whose members are filled by political appointments, seeing them as “antagonistic, bureaucratic and the antithesis of the charter school concept” (Allen and Consoletti, 2). Though they are not local entities, they are still linked to the existing educational bureaucracy. On the flip side, Megan Batdorff and Byran Hassel of Public Impact support ICBs because of their capacity for staffing and for the experience they can bring into educational management (Batdorff and Hassel, iii). Gau notes that ICBs, along with nonprofits, “show the greatest promise” because they “engage in chartering by choice, not coercion, have ample resources…and can skillfully navigate the treacherous politics of charter authorizing” (Gau, ix). Overall, ICBs are able to directly and singularly focus on charter school authorizing as their only function and utilize data-driven decision making to do the job well, according to supporters (Ibid).
Higher Education Institutions

Several states, including Michigan, Minnesota, Florida, Missouri, New York, and Ohio, have enabled colleges and universities to bring their educational expertise to the charter sector by authorizing schools. As of 2012, there were 43 higher education authorizers, with 14 institutions overseeing ten or more schools (“State of Charter,” 4).

On Desire

Because of political relationships between elected officials and board of trustees, higher education institutions “have at best a moderate desire to become authorizers” (Palmer, 306). However, because many of them have to elect to become an authorizer on their own volition, these institutions can be argued to have a stronger will to manage charter schools than districts, which are sometimes forced to do so.

On Political Insulation

According to Nabila Gomaa of the University of Toledo, universities are deeply immersed in politics when deciding whether or not to become an authorizer. In a study of a prospective authorizing institution in Michigan, Gomaa finds that unions, faculty members, parents, administrators, donors, political parties, and even the Governor have attempted to sway the institution through lobbying (Gomaa, 138-140). Despite these factors, Palmer claims universities are able to “create fairly strong political insulation” once they are handed authorizing power and rely heavily on data, not politics, to make decisions (Palmer, 307).

On Resources

Palmer also stresses universities’ ability to develop strong infrastructure by smart use of indigenous resources preexisting on college campuses, such as experienced staff (Ibid). The Center for Education Reform praises universities as “exceptional authorizers” because of their
impressive financial, legal, human resources, and educational infrastructure (Allen and Consoletti, 1). As with ICBs, Batdorff and Hassel endorse university authorizers because of their ability to handle large portfolios as a result of a wealth of manpower and experience (Batdorff and Hassel, iii). When the “resources of higher education are brought to bear on K-12 problems,” robust authorizing can occur (Center for Education Reform 2011).

However, not all scholars agree with this rosy assessment. Gomaa raises serious questions about the political ramifications of higher education’s engagement with charters. The Michigan institution she studied “was a tool for the Governor’s political agenda” and the entire decision-making process was “political in nature” (Gomaa, 154). Gau, in a survey of twenty higher education authorizers, ascertains that while universities are able to obtain a wealth of data from schools, they “don’t appear to use it well” by not leveraging such information to hold schools accountable, and “do not tap into any additional human resource help…universities offer,” creating a weak authorizing environment (Gau, 21).

**Nonprofit Boards**

States have begun to allow the boards of 501(c)(3)’s, or nonprofit organizations, to become authorizers. As of this writing, only Minnesota and Ohio have passed laws permitting this, though other states, such as Idaho, have considered similar legislation. Between these two states, there are 19 authorizers, 11 of whom oversee ten or more schools (“State of Charter,” 4). A December 2012 study of Ohio authorizers by Michigan State University, one of the few scholarly analyses of performance based on authorizer type, finds that students “attending Ohio charters that were originally authorized by nonprofit organizations experience, on average, lower achievement gains (both in math and reading) than those of students in other charter schools” (Zimmer, et al., 23). Still, some advocates believe them to represent a viable authorizing model.
On Desire

Though they are authorizers by choice, nonprofits only hold a “moderate desire” to authorize as many are wary of legal liability issues and serve other functions that may prevent them from making authorizing specifically a priority (Palmer, 307). But like universities, they have to opt-in for the job as well.

On Political Insulation

At the same time, nonprofits have supposedly “strong” protections from politics because members of their boards “are less likely than elected or appointed officials to base their decisions about charters on politics and more likely to base them on data” (Ibid, 307). Nonprofits can be counted on to make key decisions with less sway from external forces because they are not directly linked to the political process and are standalone organizations with their internal interests in mind.

On Resources

In addition, nonprofits “often have savvy grant writers and experience with the challenges of starting and managing an organization,” links to local communities, and experience in education (Ibid, 307). Thus, nonprofits may be better suited to build strong infrastructure to support authorizing. Gau echoes her support of ICBs in asserting that nonprofit boards can become quality authorizers because of their commitment to the effort and abundance of resources (Gau, ix).

Independent boards, universities, and non-profits represent a drastic expansion in the authorizing field. However, some scholars are cautious when recommending independent authorizing, seeking to avoid steps that can create an authorizing environment that is detrimental to quality. One of the concerns is around that of “multiple authorizers.” McGraw believes that
Minnesota’s charter scene, with LEA, nonprofit, and university authorizing, features “too great a variety” of authorizers (McGraw, 33). Zimmer argues that authorizer “type is only one factor among many that may contribute to the variation in performance among charter schools” but “it is surely not the most important factor” (Ibid, 23). As a matter of fact, “high and low performers exist among the schools authorized by each type of authorizers” (Ibid). A 2009 Stanford University-led study finds that states with multiple authorizing options experience “significantly lower growth in academic learning in their students” (CREDO, 4).

With multiple authorizers, charters “are able to identify and choose the more permissive entity to provide them oversight” (Ibid). So charter schools of all performance levels “shop for the most lenient authorizers,” creating a race to the bottom phenomenon (Osborne, 12). In addition, since most states mandate that authorizers receive a certain percentage of per pupil funding from each school it oversees (known as the ‘authorizing fee’), “some nonprofits use…chartering as a way to generate revenue, offering little support or oversight” (Osborne, 12).

Of course, the literature on authorizing and these different models of independent oversight is still a work in progress. As research matures, the educational world will have a better idea of models and their correlation to academic progress. Still, besides the details-oriented differences and room for growth within this school of thought, the overall stance holds firm that independent authorizers, with power away from local school boards, can do a better job at authorizing. Though they may hold variations on the exact form of quality authorizing, advocates are principled in asserting the independent authorizing approach is the way to achieve quality in the charter sector.
Although independent authorizing can strengthen the world of charters, advocates risk abandoning their second promise of quality in regular school districts. With independent authorizing models, districts face the chipping away of their long-held full control over education within their local area. Local districts can lose the power to decide which schools open as competition for their students and where charters can be placed within their boundaries. They can also become compelled by state law to pay charters that set up shop up in their district, regardless of whether they were approved by the district or not. And charter payments are already a tricky situation for incumbent district-charter relations. This loss of power at the local level in order to empower independent authorizers can exacerbate existing tensions between charters and districts through unregulated charter growth and expansion, rendering negative academic and fiscal effects on school districts as a whole. In addition, inequities – where schools serve some populations but not others – can be created that also pose a threat to the democratic nature of public education itself.

America’s educational destiny has traditionally been determined at the local level. Since the late nineteenth century, “Americans have relied upon government schools as a principal purveyor of deeply cherished democratic values,” writes Diane Ravitch and Joseph Viteritti (Ravitch and Viteritti, 5). Independent authorizing could change all that in districts across America.

Subsection A: In Defense of Local Boards

The shift of control away from local school boards started by the first charter schools has accelerated under the expansion of the charter-authorizing sector. The arrival of independent authorizers not only challenges local control, but the entire concept is born out of a deep mistrust
of local entities. Charter authorizing practices, in short, run counter to “long-standing traditions of local school board control” (Lake, 1). When local control is taken away, which independent authorizing threatens to do, the effect on school districts can be quite negative.

Local control represents communities’ direct link to public institutions and the mechanisms of funding tied to them. When such a link disappears, the very institutions’ existences can be up in the air. It has been mentioned that district-charter relations are already quite strained over the financial impact charter schools has on traditional districts’ budgets. But when a district loses the power to, at the very least, decide the schools that can open up within its locality, the budgetary strain of the district is multiplied and potentially brought to the brink of financial calamity.

Bryan Shelly, in *Money, Mandates, and Local Control in American Public Education*, argues that governmental bodies are increasingly “regulating education without providing funding sufficient to cover the cost of implementation” (Shelly, 157). Local entities are then forced to “divert funds toward implementing regulations” it did not ask for (Ibid). Consequently, the ability of localities to “undertake independent policy proposals [is] greatly hamper[ed]” (Ibid). As local governments are already “constrained in their ability to raise funds,” the health of local districts is threatened - as well as the education of children in the public system (Ibid). For Shelley, regulations such as special education mandates, state curricular standards, standardized testing, and teaching requirements are curtailing local control and limiting the “discretion of local actors in areas where they previously enjoyed a relatively high level of autonomy” (Ibid, 2). Though some top-down regulations are necessary to safeguard students’ rights and educational experiences (such as school standards for students with disabilities), school boards are historically trusted to enact rules at the local level themselves because they understand their
unique student populations more so than players at higher levels of government. School boards make decisions on behalf of their communities and are able to allocate resources and finances based on the priorities set by the citizenry. When local control is compromised, so is the ability of community to make considered decisions for itself. This diverting of funds is not unlike the status quo of a district struggling to make payments for charter schools – which can get worse under independent authorizing.

Subsection B: Democracy Undermined?

Democratic principles are why traditionalists believe local school control is critical in both theory and practice. With independent authorizing regimes, the democratic nature of public education can be infringed upon. In a 2010 essay linking together the benefits of school boards and democratic engagement, education theorists Anne Bryant and Michael Resnick explained that local control is the most effective way for schools to engage their local communities, a critical function of a democratic school system. Local education leaders “talk with parents about their children, meet with reporters, address local clubs, and bring together citizen groups on a wide range of issues concerning the schools and their impact on the community” (Bryant and Resnick, 8). Only with local boards can “decisions affecting children and the school environment [be] shaped and approved by people who represent the community” (Ibid, 8). With school boards, local leaders can report directly to local stakeholders about the state of the public schools. Leaders of civic organizations, after-school program leaders, members of civic groups, libraries, and other local actors play key roles in the rhythms of daily life in communities and in schools as well. And the foundations of local control are the points of engagement for all community actors.

In Rethinking School Choice, Jeffrey Henig sharply criticizes the market approach in
education as putting forth policies which “impinge on the free exercise of choice by some groups as the price exacted for increasing the options for others” (Henig, 21). He defends decision-making through democratic governance, asserting that for all “its exasperatingly slow pace, democratic government plays an absolutely critical role in airing alternative visions, encouraging compromise, and enticing disparate groups to redefine their interests and find common ground” (Ibid, 10). Reformers, therefore, must not “let frustration with public bureaucracies further sap governmental capacity and authority” (Ibid, 197). Kenneth R. Howe and David E. Meens of the University of Colorado Boulder, writing on the demise of local autonomy in education, confirm Henig’s views and proclaim that true democracy involves a trust “in the people to rule themselves, based on their collective judgment, freed from externally imposed dictates” (Howe and Meens, 2). For democracy to occur, reform “should involve local stakeholders, especially marginalized members of society, because inclusion is a democratic value that increases not only the likelihood that policies will be just, but also the likelihood that reform will succeed” (Ibid, 15). Howe and Meens argue that democratic control of education enables local deliberation on educational issues of equity and access, allows for more targeted, localized spending of funds, and creates a more active citizenry attuned to democratic values (Ibid). In a democratic framework, local entities will be able to claim ownership of change and educational outcomes.

This traditionalist form of democracy does seem to be held hostage to new definitions of itself thanks to the charter movement. In a 2002 book, Gary Miron and Christopher D. Nelson argue that charter and choice advocates are attempting to redefine the meaning of public schooling in the American polity. The traditional, or “formalist” definition favored by local proponents is that a “school is public if it is owned or controlled by citizens or their duly elected representatives” (Miron and Nelson, 195). However, advocates of choice have introduced a
“more flexible…’functionalist’ definition” that contends a school is public “not by virtue of lines of authority and chains of influence, but by whether it performs important public functions” (Ibid, 195). In a democracy, the authors assert, it is required “not just that citizens agree with policy outcomes, but also have an opportunity to influence the process by which these outcomes are generated” (Ibid, 196). This influence is clearly missing with independent authorizers. As a movement already struggling to define itself as educating all children and not excluding certain populations from educational options, charters have a long way to go to prove that its schools fit the democratic guarantees of public education in this country. Sponsoring independent authorizers may make that task even more difficult.

**Subsection C: A Peace Treaty or Total War?**

As shown previously, independent authorizing can place great strain on the traditional public school system. For some, this is not a problem – they would prefer that charters win out in the end and overtake failing school districts. Market theory suggests that some level of destruction via competition must be had for success to be scaled and replicated in any sector. When commenting about money leaving traditional public schools to flow to charter operators, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools admits that the situation “will inevitably lead to ‘bad’ situations for a ‘handful of school districts,’” but that the focus has to be instead on “what’s best for the academic outcomes of students” (Kardish). In other words, as long as quality is achieved, one should be agnostic over the type of school that is delivering results.

Others go even further. In his 2012 book, *The Urban School System of the Future: Applying the Principles and Lessons of Chartering*, former Deputy Assistant Secretary at the U.S. Department of Education Andy Smarick insists that the “traditional urban public school system is broken and it cannot be fixed” (Smarick, xi). He observes that just about
“everyone...assumes that the traditional school district is essential and immortal – that because of its age and standing, it must be the driver of and/or the focus of reform” (Ibid). But in his view, local school districts are not the solution – they are the problem. There should instead be “the permanent demotion and the potential cessation of the district” model in favor of a charter-driven “system of schools” (Ibid, xvii). It is in charter schooling where “the blueprint for the urban school system of the future” can be found (Ibid). Chartering cannot be seen as a “subsidiary” of public education, but instead as “the system for urban education’s future” (Ibid).

Not every education reformer shares Smarick’s more extreme views, however. Across the country, advocates and traditionalists are finding common ground to cooperate, with the understanding that school systems of the future will consist of traditional public and public charter schools co-existing, a nod to the charter movement’s second promise. In February 2010, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation began to bring district and charter leaders from major American cities together through the District-Charter Collaboration Compact initiative, where ideas, resources, and data could be shared for the benefit of all. Leaders from both sectors “had begun to see ‘common ground rather than a battleground” (Lake, Nelson, Yatsko, 2). They “simply reached the point where they recognized that they could serve more kids more effectively by collaborating rather than competing and by making a simple trade of resources and responsibilities” (Ibid, 21). In 2010, Baltimore, Denver, Hartford, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Nashville, New Orleans, New York City, and Rochester signed onto the compact; Philadelphia, Austin, Boston, Central Falls (RI), Chicago, Sacramento, and Spring Branch (TX) joined them in 2011 (Ibid).

The Compacts, as well as Smarick’s base ideas, are based on the “portfolio model” of public education. This view “push[es] district and charter leaders to focus more attention on how
a given school performs instead of how it is governed” (Ibid, 2). This is, of course, ironic considering how charter advocates have turned to the structures of governance in independent authorizing to enable quality in their sector. As Kenneth J. Saltman of DePaul University explained in 2010, the idea is that “superintendents build portfolios of schools that encompass a variety of educational approaches offered by different vendors, then over time school districts will weed out under-performing approaches and vendors…[and] more children will have more opportunities for academic success” (Saltman). Leveraging the strategies of decentralization of power to school sites (largely billed as principal empowerment), expansion of high-quality schools regardless of type, the closure of all “failing” schools both charter and traditional, and strong accountability structures, portfolio management is, at the very least, an attempt to see traditional and charter schools on an even playing field based on quality.

Despite the olive branch, portfolio management is more of a management philosophy to view schools through a similar lens, but it does not settle the inherent structural and governance issues faced by charter and district leaders. There is clear disagreement among education policymakers over how the second promise of charter schools – to improve district schools – can be met (or if it should be kept as all). Advocates are moving towards models that could lead to improved charter schools but less local control while traditionalists hold arguments that protect school boards. Despite these differences in opinion, cooperation does seem to be a wish of both charter and local district leaders. If traditional school districts are to be preserved and the second promise of the charter movement is to be met, co-existence is key.
| PART TWO |

*CASE STUDIES:* THE SEARCH FOR QUALITY AND STABILITY IN THREE AMERICAN CITIES
Do governing structures exist, then, that can promote high quality charter sector and improve traditional schools as well? Are there authorizing models that can truly lead to the fulfillment of the two original promises of charters? The answers, perhaps, lie in an exploration of three urban school districts. Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and Atlanta each offer differing governing systems for charter schools – with contrasting impacts for traditional schools in each city as well. Each case study begins with an overview of the authorizing model, followed by an evaluation of the authorizer(s) based on advocates’ three criteria of desire, political insulation, and resources. Then, I judge the city’s performance on the first and second promises.

Subsection A: Case Study Overview

"I believe we will give rise to the finest urban school system in the country."

- Governor Mark Schweiker (R-PA) in 2001 speaking about Philadelphia after the state takeover

Philadelphia is not just a city that has become a major battleground in the national debate over education reform; it also is a rather unique case study on charter authorizing for two reasons. First, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) is still the authorizer of the city’s 86 charter schools, providing for an intriguing test case for advocates’ assertions that local boards are naturally not fit for authorizing duties. And second, the independent authorizing movement has also reached Pennsylvania. As the PA state legislature debates moving power away from local districts such as the SDP and enabling university authorizers, among other reforms, Philadelphia is an interesting lens into the authorizing debate as a city potentially in transition.

The school board that governs Philadelphia’s traditional and charter public schools is not a conventional, elected board that would be found in a majority of districts across the country. At
12:01 AM on December 22, 2001, the SDP became "the property and problem of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania” (Schogol and Snyder). A historic agreement between Republican governor Mark Schweiker and Democratic Mayor John Street placed the beleaguered school system in technical control of the state. It also created the School Reform Commission (SRC), a school board with the extraordinary powers of an emergency financial board that also has the power to impose and edit contracts at will. The final arrangement allows the governor to appoint three members of the SRC and the mayor the power to select the final two.

The “takeover,” as it is known in general terms, was just the latest in a series of reforms aimed at turning around Philadelphia’s schools. After the creation of the SRC, the SDP would experiment with a “diverse provider” model of partially privatized management of select schools that was eventually abandoned, go through a revolving door of superintendents, and implement a carousel of other reform strategies that never took hold (Gold). Heading into the 2013-2014 school year, the SDP faced a $304 million budget deficit, the latest fiscal crisis for a system where pleading for full education funding year after year has become the norm (Mezzacappa). Educational outcomes are just as bleak. Just 64% of Philadelphia’s high schoolers graduate within four years (“Building Capacity”). And among those that enter college right after high school, only 35% earn a bachelor’s degree and 5% receive an associate’s degree within a six-year time frame (Ibid).

Despite all the turmoil and tumult that has faced one of the nation’s largest school systems, there has been one reform movement that has remained constant in Philadelphia: charter schools. Philadelphia’s foray into the world of charters began in 1996. That year, four charter schools launched what has become a massive intercity movement away from traditional public schools (Blanc et al., ii). Today, there are 86 charters in Philadelphia, commanding the 8th biggest
market share of any district in the country, with 55,031 students in charter schools (198,929 total in the entire city system), accounting for a share of 27.0% in 2012-2013 (“The Public Charter School Dashboard”). Philadelphia also holds the largest charter market share of any school district in America with over 150,000 students (Ibid).

And this market is still expanding. Analysis from the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) “projects that charter schools will compose 40 percent of public school enrollment by the 2016-17 school year” (“Transforming Philadelphia’s Public Schools,” 6). From 2010 to 2012, the SDP has lost a great number of students. Its student population fell from approximately 193,000 students in 2003 to approximately 152,000 during this time period, a decline of around 21 percent (Ibid, 9). During the same decade-long span, “enrollment in charters…increased by more than 150 percent, from approximately 20,000 in 2003 to 52,000” in 2012 (Ibid). The school district certainty has an enormous responsibility to authorize and oversee a large charter presence that is educating more and more children every year.

**Subsection B: Evaluating Authorizer Quality**

Unfortunately, a review of the district’s authorizing practices reveals a poor history of charter oversight. On desire, political insulation, and resources, Philadelphia fails advocates’ criteria for quality authorizing, potentially fueling the assertion that a school district should not be monitoring and making renewal decisions on charter schools.

**Desire**

Charter operators have long felt that the SDP does not take authorizing seriously. Elbert Sampson, the former CEO of Wakisha Charter in Philadelphia, describes the struggles he endured to “get answers to simple things” because “nobody at 440 [SDP headquarters] could tell [him] how to resolve things” involving his school (Sampson 2014). For example, when Sampson
needed assistance locating a building for Wakisha, he ran into a bureaucracy unwilling to help:

> When I started looking for a building [for Wakisha to be housed in], the first thing I did was go down to 440. I talked to so many people [but] I couldn’t get anyone to talk to me about how I go about getting an empty school building. They were all over the place. Nobody was prepared to have that conversation. And what I learned was that they didn’t have a policy to transfer school buildings into the hands of charter operators. They didn’t want to do that. But nobody had talked about how to do that mechanically…nobody wanted to do that. It’s almost sinful. I did our building for 8.5 million dollars. People from the school district told me it would’ve cost us $25 million easily. And there’s nothing special about the building. It’s government, and there’s just inefficiency about government that we all take for granted. We all accept it. It’s just what it is (Ibid).

Still, the SDP believes it can be an effective authorizer – but acknowledges that it is not currently one. “I think trying to be transparent and communicate well consistently is something that the district overall doesn’t always do a great job of. That annoys charter operators,” said one of three SDP staffers who agreed to speak with me on the condition that their names and titles remain unpublished (District Staffer II 2014). Another staffer directly dismisses the idea that as a district, Philadelphia has no desire to authorize. “On the desire piece, I would say that everyone wants the district to be better at monitoring [because] there’s widespread agreement that there needs to be more information in the public, there needs to be better transparency” and “both sides need the data to make their arguments” (District Staffer I 2014).

The district is currently showing its desire to effectively authorize charter schools and turn around its poor history of doing so with the “Authorizing Quality Initiative” (AQI), an internal, homegrown effort by the Office of Charter Schools to enact authorizing best practices and communicate clear expectations to operators. With AQI, the SDP is trying to run against the wind and overturn the idea that a local district cannot house a quality authorizer. The effort focuses on the “development and implementation of clear, transparent policies and procedures” in outlining “high standards” for charter school agreements, the setting of “contractual
benchmarks” to measure charter progress, policies to ensure “non-discriminatory and non-selective access” to schools, expectations of equity for all students, and ways parents, students, and stakeholders can be better informed of charter school quality (“AQI,” 2-3). Clearly, the SDP has not always shown itself to be a willing quality authorizer. Even as AQI takes shape and district officials argue that the district can authorize well, the long-term outcome may depend on other factors beyond the sheer will to better Philadelphia’s authorizing functions.

Political Insulation

Nobody within or outside the district singles out politics as a reason why Philadelphia has been a poor authorizer. District Staffer II criticizes the idea that the SDP cannot make data-driven decisions because of politics, saying that, “Philadelphia in general is a political city…I don’t think you’re ever going to escape those political sways that affect ultimately who gets to open a charter school, who might get to expand, [because] some of that’s going to exist no matter who the authorizer is” (District Staffer II 2014). Sampson, as an advocate, agrees. “Politics is inevitable,” he says when asked about whether achieving political insulation can lead to better authorizing. “Education has always been political…it’s a big part of our political life and our societal mission. It’s not something that just happens…Education is the most visible public service that we engage in. And so, no I don’t think we’ll ever have a time when that won’t be the case” (Sampson 2014).

Resources

Though those within the Philadelphia education scene may dismiss the role of politics in the school district’s authorizing woes, there seems to be consensus on the lack of resources as a dominant factor in authorizer quality. The SDP’s charter office has historically been understaffed and underfunded. The district just does not “have the resources. It’s just not a pretty picture,”
frowned Sampson (Ibid). During an interview, Sampson, who now works for a charter financing organization known as *Charter Choices*, points at a dearth of resources as the culprit for lenient accountability standards and tension between the district and charter officials:

We’ve always had a charter office that very rarely adequately staffed in the past that had the resources. So the school district and the SRC got into this cycle of looking at charter renewal applications, and unless there was something absolutely glaring, they’d renew the charter. And that happened year after year after year. And so at some point, it became almost expected that unless a school did something just glaring, unless they were so out of the norm, they would in fact get their charter renewed - which began to erode whatever social standards for performance that existed. Now they’re looking up and seeing that there are a lot of schools that probably shouldn’t be renewed that are getting renewed and they’re trying to figure out how to stop that process. So that creates a lot of tension between the charter community and the school district (Ibid).

District staffers point to a lack of *capacity* to authorize as a primary source of why the district is perceived to be a poor authorizer today. “I think people are starting to realize…we actually need enough people to [do the work]. Eventually, the charter office will be seven. That will be the largest size the office has been in the history of its existence,” said a staffer (District Staffer II 2014). Jennifer Nagourney, a former National Association of Charter School Authorizers Fellow based in Philadelphia when the charter school office was run by only three individuals and who is also now the Executive Director of the Charter School Office at the Delaware Department of Education, agrees that staffing levels are integral to success. “In Delaware, we have 21 schools. Our staff just went to 4…that’s still not enough to do all the oversight that needs to get done,” she says (Nagourney 2014). In Philadelphia, though, “you can’t even get the information, [much less] be able to analyze it and respond to it” because there are so few people (Ibid). Staffer II comments, “I think the district can get [more staff]. But I don’t think the SDP will ever have the 25 person team in the charter office so they can all have regular 9 to 5 jobs” (Ibid). “Most authorizers,” says Staffer I, “have enough resources to do qualitative reviews of charter schools, set up site visits every year or to do in-depth analyses of
ELL programs of Special Education programs or discipline policies” (District Staffer I 2014).

Philadelphia, however, has no such capacity. To add, the process for closing charter schools is especially difficult, a job made tougher because of a weak charter law. “It’s a resource drain on the charter office,” says the third district staffer, “it’s a full time job [for just closing] one school” (District Staffer III 2014). The process itself is “drawn out for so long” because of two district hearings and SRC votes, an automatic appeal to the state, and then another potential appeal to the state or Supreme Court (District Staffer II 2014). The “whole process can take years” for a single non-renewal, which hurts the district’s ability to manage quality on a yearly basis (Ibid). Even Sampson agrees, stating, “It should not be two years [for closure], that just doesn’t make sense at all. It should be as fast as possible so people aren’t living in limbo” (Sampson 2014). However, the former Wakisha CEO says there’s a larger reason behind the long process. “The reason I believe it’s a two year process is…the people who are subject to that decision feel that they haven’t gotten a fair hearing” and “a lot of that has to do with the fact that the district is not clear with what that criteria should be. [They] just haven’t done that since day one,” he says (Ibid). Staffer II agrees that the district needs to do a “a better job on the front end of notice and having a transparent policy for schools who are underperforming, knowing they are underperforming, maybe they’ll be less of a surprise or fight if they recognize that they’ve been failing children for too long” (District Staffer II 2014). In other words, a challenged, short-staffed charter school office is not able to communicate standards effectively to stakeholders, which results in unhappy charter operators, which then equals the difficulty in closing charter schools, which is another further drain on the existing, overworked staff.
Subsection C: The Promises

The First Promise: Charter Schools

With a history of poor authorizing, charter schools in Philadelphia have been found to be statistically unimpressive performance-wise when compared to their traditional peers. In a March 2008 RAND Corporation study examining 2000-2001 and 2006-2007 performance data from charter schools in reading and mathematics, “students’ average gains attending [Philadelphia] charter schools [were] statistically indistinguishable from the gains they experience[d] while at traditional public schools” (Blanc et al., iii). The report used longitudinally linked student-level data to specifically examine students before and after they entered or transferred to a charter school. RAND’s analysis suggested that charters actually “have a negative and statistically significant effect in math and no significant effect in reading” for students in their first year (Ibid, 19).

No comprehensive study of Philadelphia’s charter schools has been undertaken since the 2008 RAND report. In 2013, the PA Department of Education overhauled its school report card ranking system, offering a new “School Performance Profile” (SPP) that scores individual schools out of 100. In an analysis of aggregated SPP scores from the Philadelphia Inquirer, 29 charter schools and 38 district-run schools scored above 70.0 (“Pennsylvania County Performance Profile”). 66 SDP schools scored below 50.0 compared to just 17 charters (Ibid). This is, of course, a crude measure of success. One must also keep in mind that the district also operates nearly three times the number of schools as the entire charter sector. However, these numbers are an affirmation of the uneven quality of schools across the system, particularly within the traditional system. There is great variance in quality of the options available in the city. Philadelphia surely has not met the first promise of the charter movement of a robust, high-
quality system of chartered schools.

**The Second Promise: Traditional Schools**

Philadelphia’s traditional schools have been in perpetual academic and financial turmoil. The second promise is not being met with the current authorizing structure, but independent authorizing could decimate the potential of it ever been reached in Philadelphia. The school district believes that the arrival of independent authorizing and the loss of local control could spell the end of the SDP for good.

Plainly, Philadelphia has an underperforming public school system – and charters are not motivating traditional schools to improve. “Philadelphia’s schools remain among the worst performing academically of any school district in the nation,” BCG summarizes (“Transforming Philadelphia’s Public Schools,” 19). In fourth-grade reading on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as the “Nation’s Report Card,” Philadelphia had an average scale score of 199, below the national average of 220 and the PA average of 227, placing it as the fifth worst performing urban district in the country (Ibid, 20). Also studied by RAND in 2008 was the impact charters have had on the second promise of the movement to raise the quality of traditional schools. “Presumably, the closer a TPS [traditional public school] is to a charter school,” the authors wrote, “the more likely the school will feel competitive pressure” (Blanc et al., 26). Examining traditional schools sorted by distance to a charter school and the overall presence of the sector within a 2.5-mile radius of a school, RAND found that charters were “not having differential effects on individual schools nearby” (Ibid, 28). “We find no evidence that the district schools located in neighborhoods with the greatest charter competition are performing any better or any worse as a result of the competition,” the report concluded (Ibid, iii).
There is then the argument that charters are actually financially damaging the school district, as there is openly hostile tension between charter advocates and defenders of the traditional system. War is afoot in the city, largely over school funding. “The thing that prevents a legitimate, sophisticated conversation over whether charter schools are good for the district…is the money issue,” says a staffer (District Staffer I 2014). “I agree, I think it’s the biggest issue that drives the tension,” another affirms (District Staffer II 2014). Firstly, Philadelphia’s schools are underfunded. The Pennsylvania State Education Association asserts that the state falls “short” of its constitutional requirement to fully fund education (Ibid, 4). In 2006, the state-ordered “Costing Out Study” of education found that PA needed to invest more than $4.5 billion to “meet state and federal standards” of adequate education funding (“Pennsylvania’s Public School Funding,” 5). The lack of a clear funding system “creates inequitable academic opportunities for students and undermines the ability of local communities to meet their full economic potential” (Ibid, 4). Over the course of the 2011-2012 school year, the SDP specifically was forced to find ways to plug a $715 million “budget gap” and yet still faced a $1.1 billion cumulative deficit for the next five years (“Transforming Philadelphia’s Public Schools,” 6).

The war between charter-district backers in the city centers, though, on the cost of charters on the SDP’s budget – which directly affects traditional schools. Philadelphia’s charter are “entitled to no less than the budgeted total expenditures per average daily membership of the prior school year” (Blanc et al., 5). In other words, funding to charters is “based on a district’s cost of providing an education to its students in the previous year, minus federal payments to districts and some other items, like transportation, construction costs, and debt service payments” (Hardy). In 2008, the SDP paid out $7,708 for each “regular” charter student and $16,760 for
special education students (Blanc et al., 5). In total, the 2007 school year cost the District $240 million in charter payments alone (Ibid). Charter expansion meant the cost to the district ballooned to $708 million in 2013, close to 30% of the SDP’s whole operating budget (Hardy). In 2013, charters in Philadelphia were allocated $8,597 for each regular education student and $22,242 for special education students (Ibid).

The core problem here is that, with the way PA’s charter law is designed, the school district loses money for every charter seat that is added in the city. Around a third of Philadelphia’s charter students are from outside the traditional system. This means that the “roughly $10,400 average per-pupil payment” the SDP must make to a charter “represents an entirely new cost to the District” (“Transforming Philadelphia’s Public Schools,” 34). Even when students transfer from an SDP to a charter-operated school, the SDP is only able to shed about half of the cost (around $4,500 according to former SRC Commissioner Joseph A. Dworetzky) because “many fixed costs remain, such as school administration, facilities costs, and central office services (Ibid). The weighed average net cost of a new charter student in Philadelphia to the school district is $7,000 (Dworetzky) (“Transforming Philadelphia’s Public Schools,” 34).

Making matters worse for Philadelphia is that charter schools can petition directly to the state Department of Education for funding, which is then directly taken out of the SDP’s pockets. “Some charters have over-enrolled their existing enrollment limits and have been able to end-run the District’s refusal to pay for over-enrolled students by going directly to the state for payment,” says Commissioner Dworetzky. The SRC has been fighting in court to impose enrollment caps on charter schools, so it can manage growth. A district analysis in February 2014 discovered that more than 1,500 charter students in the city are “overenrolled” students in schools that have exceeded their caps, accounting for a huge financial burden on the SDP (Socolar).
BCG contends that if “students switch from District-operated to charter schools at rates similar to the past, SDP’s enrollment is likely to drop by another 15,000 students by 2017 (“Transforming Philadelphia’s Public Schools,” 9). Continued charter expansion can cost the SDP “roughly an additional $158 million in the year 2017 or a cumulative total of approximately $516 million [from 2012 to 2017] if students continue to leave District…at a pace consistent with the expansion of available charter seats (Ibid, 35).

Adding to charter-district tension in Philadelphia is a case that has also plagued charter advocates across the nation: equity. The SDP “serves a greater share of severely disabled students” (“Transforming Philadelphia’s Public Schools,” 34). To illustrate, 50 percent of SDP’s disabled students are low-incidence disabilities compared to 32 percent in the charter sector (Ibid). Charters “also serve a lower share of English language learner (ELL) students” to the tune of “3.3 percent in charters versus 8.1 percent in District-operated schools” (Ibid). There are also nearly 10,000 students in charters who are classified as special needs (Socolar). However, the special education funding formula “makes no distinction between mildly and severely handicapped students” (Hardy). Each special education student in every charter school receives the same amount, making for an “extraordinarily high expense that districts incur to give a small but significant number of severely handicapped children specialized help” because “most of [charter’s] special education students have milder disabilities that cost much less to address” (Ibid). The Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials estimates that charters actually spend around $9,300 on each special education scholar, meaning that the school can save the difference between what is given and what is spent and use it for any purpose they wish, a luxury not offered to traditional schools (Ibid). *Keystone Politics* decries that such “tuition rates to charter schools are so bloated that charter operators are able to pocket millions of taxpayer
dollars” while local districts are forced to cut costs, exacerbating tensions between the sectors (Geeting). These additional issues of equity and funding based on inequities of service place “tremendous pressure” on the School District of Philadelphia (“Transforming Philadelphia’s Public Schools,” 34). Not only does it lose money to charter schools, it also has to educate a disproportionately higher number of special education and ELL students, who not only require more resources and attention, but are any more expensive to care for.

Through collaboration with charter officials, the SDP sees itself through the portfolio lens in developing “high-quality charter schools as part of a system of education for all students in Philadelphia” (“AQI,” 2, Emphasis Added). The Authorizing Quality Initiative is more than just a focus on quality for charter schools alone. It is evident throughout the AQI proposal that the district seeks to shape an environment of co-existence between its schools and the charter sector, which involves reigning in charter expansion and managing growth.

“In conjunction with its role as authorizer of charter schools in Philadelphia,” the AQI reads, the School Reform Commission (SRC) is “committed to considering the financial health and sustainability of the system of public schools in Philadelphia including District-managed schools” (“AQI,” 2). This means “requiring that all charter schools sign charter agreements acceptable to the District” and ensuring “non-discriminatory and non-selective access” to schools through “fair treatment in admissions and disciplinary actions” and “appropriate services for all students, including those with disabilities and English Language Learners” (“AQI,” 2-3). The Office of Charter Schools will also “manage enrollment growth limit[s]” in the form of enrollment caps (Ibid). And prior to the approval of any new charter school, the Chief Financial Officer must “prepare a written report analyzing the financial impact of each application to the District in each of the next five years” that also includes “a determination of whether the goals
underlying the application could be achieved at mitigated cost by pursuing an alternative approach or approaches” (Ibid, 8). Preference can particularly be given to new schools that have “a limited financial impact on the District through the applicant’s proposed use of District resources, proposed recruitment of students from a District-defined coachmen area, or other proposed cost-savings to the District” (Ibid, 6). The strategies employed for effective authorizing here are to not only ensure equity and quality within the charter sector, but also the same for traditional schools. Through enrollment caps, strategic planning and analysis, and signed contracts, the district itself will not only be able to effectively authorize in theory, but also concretely better manage the cost of charter schools and the impact they have on traditional public schools.

However, traditionalists are beginning to make the argument that independent authorizing directly threatens the very existence of the school district – and therefore, the second promise of the charter movement. Advocates’ turn towards quality independent authorizing has, in fact, reached the tensioned city of Philadelphia. The embodiment of the quality authorizing school of thought is in Senate Bill 1085, the “Charter Reform Bill” being considered by the PA State Senate. Local Philadelphia Newsworks reporter Kevin McCorry calls SB 1085 “a game-changer…that, if passed, promises to alter forever the landscape of public education in Pennsylvania” (McCorry). The “bill would allow any college or university with at least 2,000 students to apply to become an authorizer” and if accepted, “it could authorize an unlimited amount of charter schools within its home district” (Ibid). Even more specifically, if a university offers a bachelor’s degree in education, it will have the power to authorize charters within its entire home county; authorizers that offer a doctorate in education can then approve schools anywhere in the state (Ibid). 1085 can potentially give rise to 100 new authorizers (Ibid). And the
“money colleges would get to run charters would be taken out of the budgets of the students’
home school districts” (Ibid).

The bill would also end Philadelphia’s moratorium on new charter schools and outlaw the
imposing of enrollment caps in charter contracts (Ibid). The standard charter renewal term would
be doubled from five to ten years and charter organizations that have “two or more
charters…could become a ‘multiple charter school organization,’” and “become the purview of
the state department of education, not the local school district” (Ibid).

Supporters “say it will raise the standards by which charters are opened and evaluated”
while ensuring the opening of more high-quality charter seats (Ibid). But opponents warn of dire
consequences and see this fight as one for local control. Keystone Politics’ Jon Geeting decries
1085 as a “rotten deal for school districts” and a “textbook example of taxation without
representation” where charter schools could “set up shop in our communities…and send us the
bill” (Geeting). Susan Gobreski of Education Voters PA lashes out at the bill’s sponsors,
claiming, “taxpayers would have all of the responsibility and none of the say” (Gobreski).
Moreover, “even a higher education institution with no role or ties to a community that engages
in the authorizer process would be able to approve a charter school in another part of the state”
(Ibid). Gobreski believes this to be an infringement on local power. “Communities have a
responsibility and the prerogative,” she argues, “to make determinations about their financial
obligations and the manner of delivering services” (Ibid). Philadelphia officials, as expected, are
strongly opposed to SB 1085. As the Staffer I cautions:

It is a Wild Wild West scenario to take a district that is already like bare bones and the
district has said it is bare bones for many, many years. Well, now it’s bare bones! No
counselors, no librarians, whatever. So to take that district and to set up a system where
that district cannot project its future is and how it will responsibly allocate funds is a
recipe for creating a level of uncertainty that will be very difficult to deal with. I have no
idea how the district could deal with the fact that you could have millions and millions of
dollars leaving the system on top of what already leaves the system without any consideration for what happens next. The district would just be at the mercy of now 86 plus operators and whatever they choose to do (District Staffer I 2014).

Staffer II paints an event bleaker picture of a bill that could bankrupt SDP:

How could the district financially plan at all, not knowing how many charters are going to exist in a certain year, how many new charters are going to open, how many kids are going to move into those schools? I mean there would just be no ability for them to financial plan on how much revenue they be giving in, how many teachers they’d need, how many school buildings they’d need to keep open, they couldn’t do any of that if we just had current charters expanding however much they want, new charters being authorized by higher education institutions. When people say it would blow up the district and bankrupt the district, I mean I don’t think these are just extreme things that are thrown out. They are possibilities that could happen over time if both those things would pass and be able to be implemented (District Staffer II 2014).

**Subsection D: Summary**

Reaching the two promises of the charter movement are still elusive goals in Philadelphia’s education realm. The SDP has given off the impression that it does not care much for authorizing, as evidenced by Sampson’s experiences. Charter quality is mixed and the district has not been a quality overseer of schools. Even as it attempts to enact AQI and show itself to be a willing partner for charter schools, the SDP faces a key foundational challenge that threatens its progress: resources. “Philadelphia can be a good authorizer,” says a staffer. “We have to make a commitment at a baseline level to being transparent with the public about what’s happening in schools” (District Staffer I 2014). In order to do so, however, the district requires resources to staff its charter office adequately. On issues of quality and equity, such as performance measurement and special education services, the district cannot even “get to those conversations” because it does not have the capacity yet to even set basic expectations on such issues and communicate them to operators (District Staffer II 2014).

Resources are also an pre-existing issue based on the way that charter schools are funded, which already hurts district-run schools and elevate hostile tensions between the two educational
sectors. As disappointment in the school district as an authorizer have made way for the hopes of independent authorizing, the consequences of SB 1085 on traditional schools must be considered. If Philadelphia is to develop a system of high-quality schools, co-existence is a necessity. Current authorizing arrangements have not led to quality charters or traditional schools. But the removal of local control could spell the end for the traditional sector. The first and second promises are in grave danger in Philadelphia.
Section Six

A Bifurcated Model of Shared Success
Case Study: Washington D.C.

Subsection A: Case Study Overview

Our nation’s capitol is home to a charter sector that has received national attention for its large charter market share and independent authorizing model. The successes of the D.C. model provide for both a vibrant case study and also real lessons for other districts looking to promote charter and district harmony. More than 35,000 students, or 43 percent of D.C.’s public school population, are in the city’s 60 public charter schools across 106 campuses in every ward of the city, save for Ward 3 (“Facts About D.C.,” 1). A staggering 22,000 names are on waiting lists to enter charter schools, which are capped for enrollment (Ibid). In 1996, the D.C. School Reform Act established the D.C. Public Charter School Board (D.C. PCSB), which authorized charter schools alongside D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) in the traditional sector. But in 2007, the D.C. Board of Education was abolished and DCPS was stripped of authorizing authority, meaning charters completely fell under the purview of PCSB as the only authorizer (Ibid). This created what essentially has become a bifurcated arrangement for public education in the city: the traditional schools are run by DCPS while charters are authorized by an ICB in PCSB.

Subsection B: Evaluating Authorizer Quality

Across the board, DCPS is considered a strong authorizer with an exceptionally large support staff that manages day-to-day operations. In July 2013, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) conducted a voluntary review of PCSB’s authorizing duties. The resulting report “found PCSB to be among the highest-quality authorizers [NACSA] has ever reviewed” (Ibid). According to D.C.-based NACSA Fellow Nneka Jenkins, the board is particularly known for developing “strong systems” around performance metrics and has both
the staffing capacity and focus to continue strengthening its authorizing functions (Jenkins 2014). PCSB’s focus on utilizing data is a core reason why its systems are so strong, Jenkins claims (Ibid).

**Desire**

There is little question that the PCSB is interested in authorizing charter schools and doing it well. Part of this, of course, is because authorizing is the *only job* the board has. Much of the board’s desire to handle its duties well stems from its Executive Director, Scott Pearson. “He has a high level of interest in positioning PCSB as a best practice authorizer,” Jenkins comments (Ibid). His leadership has led to the development of strong systems and the willingness to openly share D.C.’s best practices with other authorizers. PCSB “is in the process of putting together a toolkit to share with other authorizers,” according to Jenkins (Ibid). Not only does the board hold a singularly focused mission on authorizing well, it also has the desire to share its work with others, which can be interpreted as the mark of a confident authorizer.

**Political Insulation**

The actual seven-member voting board within PCSB is entirely appointed by the mayor and confirmed by city council (Ibid). Even with an appointed body, Jenkins believes that “being an independent authorizer does give PCSB more leverage to innovate” due to its singular focus on authorizing separate from a larger political entity such as a State Board of Education (Ibid). I asked Sarah Medway, PCSB’s Charter Agreements Specialist, if she feels politics either benefits or detracts from PCSB’s work to establish a system of quality schools. “I still feel like politics are involved,” she comments, especially when decisions are made over new school openings where the interests of councilmembers, community stakeholders, and area families makes the decision-making process “a little politicized” (Medway 2014). This is also the case with
closures, which are “always still politicized in that council members and the mayor will sometimes get involved in a closure decision” through defending a poor-performing school from shuttering (Ibid). Elected officials favor stability and rarely favor having a school closure on their record. Even with the push and pull of political winds affected PCSB, observers like Jenkins argue that, above all, the board is driven by data. “Data is the backbone of PCSB,” she says (Jenkins 2014).

**Resources**

It is PCSB’s access to an abundance of resources that truly allows it to be data-centered. The ICB has around 36 full-time staff members (Ibid). “We have one of the larger staffs for an authorizing board,” says Medway (2014). An authorizer “absolutely” needs at least “five to six people on each function” of authorizing, as PCSB does (Ibid). Within the functions of executive leadership, communications, finance and operations, human capital and strategy, school quality and accountability management, equity and fidelity assurance, and data oversight, PCSB is able to dedicate personnel to fully staff its office. It is partially supported by the charter schools themselves, who are required by law to pay an “authorizing fee” of ½ a percent of their budgets to help PCSB finance its operations and bring on staff members (Jenkins 2014). The existence of this fee is not exclusive to D.C. (Hawaii and Los Angeles are two authorizers with similar fees), but advocates are paying more attention to its role in enabling resourced, quality authorizing; for example, D.C. itself is looking to increase the fee and further enrich PCSB’s resources (Ibid).

With resources comes the ability to specifically embed data evaluation into core board functions. “The school quality team has a data team. The school quality team has a data person. The equity team has a data person. The charter agreements team has a data person. It is in the core of what is done here,” Jenkins points out (2014). This resource capacity and focus on data
has enabled PCSB to start “really focusing on the academic side of non-renewal and charter review” (Medway 2014). The board “created a way to compare school performance on a common set of metrics” called the “Performance Management Framework” (PMF) that “uses academic and school climate indicators to provide a picture of a school’s overall performance” and creates tiered rankings for charters (“Facts About D.C.,” 3).

Through the PMF, PCSB ranks schools into three tiers: Tier 1 for high performing, Tier 2 for middle performing, and Tier 3 for low performing (Ibid). Every single school’s performance report, with information about student academic achievement, student academic growth, attendance, reenrollment, and high schools graduation and college acceptance rates, is all publicly available to stakeholders and factored into a final tier ranking (Ibid). These metrics are not unique to D.C., of course. However, D.C.’s ability to synthesize performance measurement into a cohesive system and adequately communicate the expectations and outcomes from the PMF is what separates it from the pack. “We’ve improved over the past few years…to say, you haven’t met the standard. We have firmer standards as to what is sufficient and what isn’t,” says Medway (Medway 2014). A yearly report from the PMF is something that D.C. “dedicate[s] entire departments to putting…together every single year” (Jenkins 2014). “It’s something they’ve been working on and trying to perfect and develop for some time now,” says Jenkins. “The way that it’s presented is really professional and attractive…with the end-user in mind…in a way that is parent friendly” (Ibid).

And with greater trust in data comes a more forceful commitment from PCSB to close low-quality charter schools. Tier 3 schools are clearly noted as “subject to assessment for potential closure” by the PCSB (“Facts About D.C.,” 3). Since 1996, one out of three D.C. charters, or 27 schools, have been closed – meaning a high 33% closure rate, more than double
than the national rate from 1990 to 2012 (Ibid, 2) (Consoletti, 6). Closing a school in D.C. “isn’t a drawn out process” like in Philadelphia (Medway, 2014). There is a two-month process with a hearing and a vote. After that “the next step would be to litigate,” Medway comments, but “there is not an intermediate appeal, so many people choose not to litigate” (Medway 2014). When a charter does litigate, the aggressiveness of the PCSB to close schools establishes precedent that also helps the cause. “We have case law. Some of these closures have made it to court and they’ve given us a lot of latitude. So that helps protect [the case for closure],” Medway notes (2014).

With its strong Performance Management Framework that delivers clear performance metrics and expectations to operators and the general public, and an aggressive pursuit to close low-performers, PCSB is “moving seats faster” than before, meaning that more children are being given the opportunity to enroll in a “high quality seat” in a better ranked charter school in D.C. (Medway 2014). In 2012, 22 schools were in the first tier, 35 were in the middle, and 8 were in the bottom (“Facts About D.C.,” 3). Between 2011 and 2013, a combination of performance management, expansion, and closure has eliminated 1,325 Tier 3 seats, created 1,245 Tier 2 seats and 2,097 Tier 1 seats (Ibid, 4). “Our market share is moving faster [in] more kids getting into high quality seats,” Medway says. “I mean we’re not done because not everyone’s guaranteed a seat in a Tier I school yet” (Medway 2014).

Subsection C: Evaluating The Promises

The First Promise: Charter Schools

D.C.’s charter sector has shown strong performance compared to its traditional counterparts. A 2013 CREDO study found, when comparing NAEP scores for students in both sectors and translating test-score growth (or decline) in standard deviations into additional (or
fewer) “days of learning,” that “on average a student at a D.C. charter school received the equivalent educational benefit each year of 99 extra days of school compared with a [scholar at a] traditional public school” (Cremata et al., 2). D.C.’s charters are achieving when serving a higher portion of students with free and reduced lunch than the traditional district (72% to 61%), a greater percentage of African American students (83% to 69%), and slightly lower proportion of ELL students (8% to 9%) and special education scholars (12% to 14%) (Ibid, 3).

On the 2012 D.C. Comprehensive Assessment System (DC CAS) examinations, charter schools overall outperformed their traditional counterparts in the city. In mathematics, 53% of those in traditional schools were proficient while 58.6% were in charter schools (Ladner). In reading, the difference was 49.5% proficiency for the district and 53% for charters (Ibid). An analysis by Matthew Ladner of the Foundation for Excellence in Education finds that the charter sector is especially educating low-incoming children better. In a comparison of only students who qualify for free or reduced lunch (FRL) on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), those in charters have gotten significantly better over time, outpacing their traditional counterparts. In 2003 on 4th grade reading proficiency, 23% of district and charter students scored basic or better on NAEP (Ibid). In 2009, both sectors were still similar, with the traditional schools with a one-point gain over charters (37% to 36%) (Ibid). However, in 2011, the numbers began to diverge. 43% of charter fourth-graders students who qualify for FRL received a mark of basic or better compared to 39% for DCPS (Ibid). And in 2013, charters saw a significant gain to 53% with traditional schools at 44% (Ibid). There are similar results in mathematics. Last year, 73% of charter FRL 4th graders scored basic or better with 63% of district students doing the same (Ibid). In 8th grade math, the comparison was an astounding 68% to 44% (Ibid). Only in 8th grade reading do charter schools (56%) trail district schools (65%);
however, gains from 2011 are greater in charters to the tune of 11 percent in two years, whereas
district schools have gained 5 percent (Ibid). On the first promise, D.C.’s charters are already
impressive on their own but also have the benefit of being under an aggressive authorizer
pushing for even higher standards of quality.

Second Promise: The Traditional Sector

Strong authorizing and an emerging charter sector have also had a positive effect on the
traditional school district. Funding-wise, DCPS and PCSB run on separate, bifurcated tracks,
which means both systems are not directly competing for the same financing source like they
would in Philadelphia. Charters are their own LEAs and receive funding directly from the D.C.
government and are “independent of the D.C. school system” (Ibid). In addition, D.C.’s funding
formula accounts for student differences. The “foundation” of student funding is a per-pupil
allotment of $9,306 per student, but there are “adjustments for students in different grade levels”
such as a 34% increase in funding for pre-kindergarten students that reflect “the smaller class
sizes and aides used at the early childhood level” (Bhat, 3). “Supplemental weights” are applied
to the tune of an additional $4,188 for each ELL student and special needs students are “funded
on a range from $5,398 to $28,849 depending on the level of services required” (Ibid). In
addition, charter schools in the District “receive a per student non-residential facilities
allowance…intended to cover expenses such as rent, building acquisition, renovation, expansion,
and debt service for any of these functions” that is currently $3,000 per student (Ibid, 14).

When it comes to academic outcomes, the test score growth highlighted in the previous
subsection affirms that although charters are displaying “stronger growth,” DCPS schools are
“improving over time” as well (Ladner). Medway “definitely think[s] that pressure has moved
DCPS” to perform better (Medway 2014). “Their scores have gone up [and] improved over the
past few years. And it’s a matter of survival for them…so they are incentivized to do better” (Ibid). However, it is not just competition that is sparking a positive, mutually beneficial relationship between both sectors. Communication is absolutely key. Medway explains, “It’s amazing right now because we’ve reached synergy, basically. This is the first time that the chancellor of the traditional school system (DCPS) communicates regularly with our [executive director]. So they work together really closely. And well as they both work together really closely with our deputy mayor of education…it’s just so much better than it used to be…” (Ibid)

Working together, the sectors have produced two joint projects: the creation of a common citywide lottery for all schools and a “joint equity report” that outlined special education, attendance, truancy, and other issues at every school across the city (Ibid). “It’s really a new kind of work: joint work,” Medway asserts (Ibid). One area where DCPS and PCSB differ is on the Performance Management Framework (PMF). Medway notes that DCPS is “hesitant” to adopt a similar performance measurement system (Ibid). “We’re, like, sure take [the PMF]. They are not biting on that…I think it just may be a proprietary thing. They just want something that they design” (Ibid). Regardless, D.C. Public Schools and the D.C. Public Charter School Board have reached a new stage in their relationship – one built on communication and a shared vision of a quality system of schools for all students.

**Subsection D: Summary**

Test scores for both DCPS and PCSB are rising and communication channels are open. Clearly, the sectors benefit from a split funding structure where there is not just one large pot of funding. The differentiated student funding formula for early childhood, special education, and ELL students, along with the facilities allocation, surely help charters as well. But most of all, it is a well-resourced charter authorizer that is able to be most effective at moving the sector
towards quality through clear performance expectations and a strong renewal process. This is an integral first step that all authorizers have to accomplish. “Once you get your systems down, then they’ll start running more smoothly and both [sector’s] leaders can focus on outward facing issues,” says Medway (Ibid). The first promise is alive and well in D.C. The future of the second promise depends on the work of DCPS itself. However, the door of possibility for a high quality traditional sector certainly remains open – due in part to a collaborative yet competitive relationship with an accountable charter sector.
Subsection A: Case Study Overview

The charter presence in Atlanta, Georgia is noticeably smaller than in Philadelphia or Washington. For the 2013-2014 school year, there are 14 charter schools in Atlanta authorized by the local district, accounting for 10% of all public school children; the sector is expected to expand to a 15% market share next year with the approval of a new large school and Atlanta’s first “turnaround” charter (Mueller 2014). Still, the sector is tiny compared to other major urban cities. “We’re small, we’re humble,” jokes Allen Mueller, the Executive Director of Innovation at Atlanta Public Schools (APS) (Ibid). Despite its size, the charter sector in this southern city is important to explore for its unique authorizing arrangement that has welcomed the establishment of a state-level ICB while still protecting and preserving local control at the district level. This technically creates dual authorizing options for Atlanta charter schools: APS or the ICB. In Atlanta’s catchment area, two charter schools (not counted in APS’s 14) are authorized by the state ICB, which oversees a total of 16 state-run charters (Sass, 1-2).

A voter-approved constitutional amendment in 2012 called “Amendment 1” shone a national spotlight on the state, as Georgia became the latest player in the charter game to practice “independent” authorizing. Amendment 1 created a State Charter School Commission (known henceforth as the “commission”), an ICB with the power to authorize charters anywhere in Georgia. This model, though, is unlike the bifurcated one in D.C. In his state, every charter contract is a “three-party contract,” Mueller explains (2014). School districts, or Local Education Agencies (LEAs), even with Amendment 1, maintain their authority to authorize charter schools. And even with the existence of an ICB, every charter contract has to pass through an LEA first.
The commission cannot unilaterally approve schools without an LEA. “We have an obligation by law once a year to hold a [charter] petition” phase and judge them based on state mandated “criteria for what a good petition is,” says Mueller (2014). Once an LEA approves a charter, a joint district-charter proposal then goes to the State Board of Education for approval. Then, the charter operator, state board, and the district co-sign the aforementioned three-party contract.

If an LEA rejects a charter proposal, then the operator can take its letter of denial to the State Commission for consideration. Even then, any contract must also pass through the state board. However, charter funding works differently if a school is authorized by the commission. Before Amendment I, there was already a state-created commission on charter schools. However, in May 2011, the Supreme Court of Georgia ruled the commission unconstitutional for allocating local tax dollars from the state level (Ibid). Amendment 1 brought the commission back, but it no longer touched local tax revenue. Instead, the commission “figure[s] out an average amount of local funding for the entire state and then it takes that chunk out of all state funding” to distribute to commission-approved charter schools in place of local revenue (Ibid). However, this means in some cases that state-approved charters are receiving half of what they would get in funding compared to LEA-approved schools. “There’s a strong incentive to go with a local authorizer” in Georgia, Mueller argues (Ibid).

**Subsection B: Evaluating Authorizer Quality**

The unconventional organizational setup for charter schools in Atlanta was proposed to provide for strong independent authorizing. However, it is APS, not the ICB, which can be said to be the stronger authorizer according to advocates’ criteria.

**Desire**

Both authorizers display a willingness to authorize. APS very much sees charter schools
as part of Atlanta’s system of schools. Therefore, authorizing is more of a natural function of the district. Within Atlanta Public Schools, charter schools are legally not their own quasi-district (LEA) as in Philadelphia and “function as part of the district” because of the three-party contractual mandate (Mueller 2014). From the approval of the school, both sides are pushed to work together because of the three-party contract arrangement. Once a school meets APS criteria, Mueller’s team will work with the charter to improve their application. Then the district and operator will present a joint case for the new charter and how it fits into the district to the State Board of Education, which has final approval authority. “Here they sit under [APS],” Mueller says of charters, “which is encouraging my warm, fuzzy expressions about working together and considering them to be part of the district” (Ibid). Because of Georgia’s unique law that requires such collaboration, he acknowledges, “it’s easier for me to say that” because “we’re forced to work together in a number of ways” as charters are, in fact, schools within the district (Ibid). From the outset, district and charter leaders have to form the basis of a working relationship to see a school opened.

This almost natural spirit of collaboration is seen in how Mueller views his office’s role within APS. His department was recently renamed the “Office of Innovation” from the “Office of Charter Schools,” a shift of “focus solely on charters to a broader [one] on best practice identification and dissemination across the district” (“2011-2012 Charter School Annual Report,” 3). Charter schools are seen by APS as “not a panacea” but instead as “one of many different strategic approaches that the district uses to create quality choices for families in our district” (Ibid). Authorizing, as a result, is not merely a side function for APS. Instead, it is an indispensable part of the district’s efforts to improve its entire system.

The State Charter Schools Commission is, by design, supposedly focused on solely on
authorizing well. After all, ICBs are supposed to be able to dedicate more energy, time, and resources to overseeing charter schools than school districts. However, there is controversy and discontentment surrounding the commission – and it is not over the body’s willingness to authorize, but whether or not it can do it well. Christine P. Ries, Professor of Economics at the Georgia Institute of Technology blames the state commission’s inability to function as “probably the major reason why we haven’t done very much” at the state charter level (Ries 2014).

**Political Insulation**

The collaborative nature of APS’s authorizing minimizes political influence while charges of a lack of political insulation riddle the commission. The embedded nature of charter schools within APS and the fact that charters work together with the district for joint approval at the state level encourages partnership over politics. Plus, because Mueller is required by law to judge each application based on state-set criteria, the process is especially de-politicized. “If they meet the criteria, then you approve the charter” and then go to the state together, Mueller notes (2014).

At the commission, though, politics has taken center stage. “I think that charters are having a pretty rough time of it,” Ries, who has also served on the Board of Directors of charter schools, told me, “[and] a lot of it is the management at the Department of Education (DoE) level. It’s really stacked with proponents of the union’s point of view” (Ries 2014). The professor believes that highly politicized state officials are intent on making life difficult for charter school operators. “We just kind of get death by a thousand cuts with constant administrative things,” Ries asserts, “any little administrative thing they could catch you [on], they did. And you just ended up spending all of your time as a board member dealing with these little things and trying to get the Department of Education to behave” (Ibid).
Ries believes that the commission specifically “was really…appointed with a lot of political interests in mind…and it wasn’t so much on the basis of the kind of people that really understood charters” (Ibid). She extends her explanation on why the commission has been politically troubling:

I think that these organizations, once they are infiltrated by places like the teachers’ unions or they become clients of the traditional sector, it’s really next to impossible to turn them around. Those who are invested in the whole traditional school structure just shot through the Department of Education and everywhere else…They’re in this established, backward-looking, affiliation of groups for a long time. And you can get votes, you can get the constitution amended, [but] established interests are there, they’re dug in deep, and they’re kind of everywhere. There’s not a conspiracy, it’s just they all feel the same way, and they’re just going to use every little thing they can to cause trouble for charters (Ibid).

On the selection of a new state Superintendent, Ries argues, “we need somebody to go deep into the Department of Education administration and knock heads and clean it up and fire people. That means you need an administrator, not a politician, to go in and do elected jobs” (Ibid). Unfortunately, politics is Ries’ overriding factor as to why the commission has not been a success. Political considerations have overtaken quality authorizing. “If the Department of Education [is] really going to make the decisions based on performance and costs, then you have no problem,” she says (Ibid). Decisions, then, must be “on the basis of meritocracy” (Ibid). Right now, as charter advocates like Ries believe, the commission is far from being data-driven and fair to charter schools, resulting in a stagnant state-level sector.

**Resources**

APS has had the capacity under Mueller’s leadership to establish strong authorizing practices while the commission is struggling to overcome cuts to its staff. The Office of Innovation at APS features four members on staff, which Mueller admits seems small, but is largely representative of the size of the city’s low charter presence (Mueller 2014). Four staff for
14 schools in Atlanta is already a much more generous ratio than seven staff for 86 charters in Philadelphia. Much of Mueller’s work is driven by APS’s new performance framework for charter schools, which his team put together. The framework “sets clearly articulated academic, financial and operational performance goals for charter schools and allows all stakeholders to readily access key information about the performance of APS charter schools” (“2011-2012 Charter School Annual Report,” 3). The goal of the framework is for schools “to determine early and with greater confidence whether or not they are reaching the goals set in their charters” (Ibid). Like in Washington, the clarity of expectations from the authorizer to charters allows APS to manage the sector with confidence. For example, even though the legal language on enrollment caps is, like in Philadelphia, quite ambiguous, Mueller pushes a hard line on the issue. “We put as one of our policies, and charter schools are not allowed to waive charter school policies, that basically they can’t exceed the number in their charter,” he outlines (Ibid). “But it has enough force” and charters abide by the policies (Ibid). Adequate resources and a focused Office of Innovation, boosted by a collaborative charter sector, allow APS to manage performance and strengthen its authorizing practices.

The commission, by contrast, has been affected by heavy staffing cuts, due to the expiration of Race to the Top dollars and Department of Education budget cuts from the Governor’s office (Ibid). Ries comments the commission is “not very transparent” and has had a difficult time getting off the ground (Ries 2014). “In terms of getting information on what kind of things were required, when things were going to meet, giving food feedback, they just haven’t done it,” she claims (Ibid). Mueller himself expresses doubt about the organizational capacity of the DoE: “There’s some fuzziness even for those who work in those departments” (Mueller 2014). Surprisingly for advocates, in Atlanta it is the district, not the state ICB, which is
resourced well and is able to define expectations and clear practices as an authorizer.

Subsection C: The Promises

The First Promise: Charter Schools

Not surprisingly, the performance of APS-authorized schools surpasses those of the Atlanta-based charters operated by the state commission. It is important to note that only two schools make up the latter grouping, making for a very small sample size. Nevertheless, the performance results of Mueller’s schools are impressively positive. Five schools in particular -- Atlanta Neighborhood Charter Elementary (ANCS-E), Atlanta Neighborhood Charter Middle (ANCS-M), Drew Charter School, Kindezi School, and KIPP Strive Academy -- outperformed the rest of Atlanta Public Schools on every single Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) assessment administrated at their school in 2012 (“2011-2012 Charter School Annual Report”). In particular, Drew, Kindezi, and KIPP Strive are three of the highest performing charters in the entire state (Ibid). KIPP Strive’s 2012 “performance in mathematics…was between 6.1 (grade 5) and 9.4 (grade 6) percentage points higher than the State” and in the realm of science, “performance ranged between 6.4 (grade 5) and 14.1 (grade 7) percentage points higher than the state” (Ibid, 42). Three other charters, KIPP Ways, Wesley International Academy, and KIPP Atlanta Collegiate outperformed the state and district averages on most measures, but not all (Ibid). Wesley is singled out for applying for International Baccalaureate (IB) status and for featuring Chinese Mandarin integration (Ibid, 71). Overall, four out of the top five statewide middle school and three of the top five elementary school performers on the CRCT are APS charter schools (Mueller 2014). Just three schools, Atlanta Preparatory Academy, Intown Academy, and KIPP Vision, score below district averages (“2011-2012 Charter School Annual Report”). Two charters, Tech High School and University Community
Wang, 77

Academy, were closed before this school year, with the latter being denied renewal (Ibid). This track record is one that Mueller is proud of. “These are not the schools that are stealing the best students,” he points out, noting that APS’s charters, “if you look at the demographics…are generally speaking taking higher levels of poverty than traditional schools. There’s a value to that” (Mueller 2014).

The two charter schools within APS boundaries authorized by the state commission are not nearly as impressive. The first, Atlanta Heights, a K-7 school, performs “below the state average in elementary grades and not significantly different than the state average in middle grades,” according to the Georgia State Charter Schools Evaluation released in 2014 (Sass, 33). The second charter, Heritage Preparatory Academy, serves grades 6 and 7. The academy’s “contribution to a middle school student’s cross-subject average achievement is lower than that of the average middle school in the state and district” (Ibid, 115). This is, of course, a very small sample size of only two schools. The state evaluation does, however, report that “the majority of state charters perform at a level that is not significantly different from the average [Georgia] school in six of the 16 specific grade/subject combinations:” elementary school reading, English, and science, middle school English, and high school literature and economics (Ibid, 13). In the four specific areas of elementary math, middle school math and science, and high school U.S. history, “the majority of state charters perform significantly worse than the average school in Georgia” (Ibid). Therefore, in a majority of subject areas, state-run charters do either the same or worse than state averages.

**Second Promise: The Traditional Sector**

In Atlanta, there still exists the potential that charter schools can motivate change in the city’s struggling traditional schools. It is no secret that APS’s traditional schools are, in an
overall sense, underperforming. In 2011, the district reported 54.4% 9th graders on-track to graduate high school, compared to the 76.3% state average (“Georgia’s Education Scoreboard”). The system’s 2012 4-year high school graduation rate was just 51%, a figure former Superintendent Erroll B. Davis Jr. called “stunningly unacceptable” (Davis Jr.). “We simply do not see enough [improvement],” he said, “we cannot be satisfied with these outcomes” (Ibid).

Still, there is hope that charters can be the labs of innovation and improvement for traditional schools that they were always meant to be. Mueller, as the head of innovation, hopes to spread good practices from successful charters to the entire district. “We have developed a number of schools that really have something that seems to be working,” he affirms. “A challenge for us is to find a way to take those best practices and use them across the district. That’s our big undertaking right now” (Mueller 2014). 

The collaborative environment surrounding APS and its charter schools is rightfully fit for even deeper partnership. The state, for example, encourages both parties to work together on special education because the law “essentially says charter schools will be treated like any other schools in the district” (Ibid). Muller comments that this is beneficial for the district’s most important stakeholders: “I think especially, with special education, it reminds us of what’s really important, right? I mean – these are kids who are having real challenges” (Ibid).

Funding-wise, APS and charters avoid conflict due to creative legal language in Amendment 1. The state of Georgia, like in Philadelphia and elsewhere, allocates resources based on a per-pupil (pp) headcount. 41% of a district’s education funding comes from local property taxes ($3,700 average/pp), 48% from state taxes ($4,300), and 11% from federal support sources ($1,200) (Ries, 5). As mentioned, the financial stipulations of Amendment 1 do not deal with local revenue. This particularly affects charter schools within districts. Recall that
in Philadelphia, traditional schools lose funding if a child transfers to a local charter school.
Amendment 1 “requires that local funding from property taxes remain with the regular public school district if the child transfers to a charter but remains [a] resident in the district” (Ibid, 4).
To fill this gap in funding, the State School Superintendent committed $430 million over 5 years upon the amendment’s passage (Ibid, 5).

In her September 2012 study titled “Do Charter Schools Hurt Students in Traditional District-Run Schools,” Professor Ries argued that Amendment 1 financially “protect[s] the existing, traditional district-based public school system” and that 129 out of 180 LEAs in the state that are large enough in size “can actually gain financially for each child that transfers to a charter school” because “the possible reduction in costs for each withdrawal is greater than the reduction in state revenues” (Ibid, 2). Districts “can potentially add an average of $1,218 to the school district budget for each child lost to charters” because they “retain…the funds that are contributed by the local property tax revenue while losing only the state and federal portions of revenue” (Ibid, 2-4). The district with the most to gain? Atlanta Public Schools which, based on Ries’ research, brings back $6,507 for each child that leaves for a charter school (Ibid, 2). This monetary setup allows Atlanta to avoid the financial-based charter tension that exists in cities like Philadelphia.

At the state level, the relationship between both the traditional and charter sector is still tensioned, likely because of continued lingering divisions over Amendment 1. “We don’t have a very large charter sector,” observes Ries, “[but] it’s still acrimonious. [The amendment] just didn’t have a big impact” (Ries 2014). Professor Ries critiques school districts for opposing the amendment. “They really didn’t care, they just kind of ignored it,” Ries says of districts’ response to the argument that traditional schools could gain financially from charter school
growth. “It was really they wanted control. And they were using this as an excuse and they sort of went onto another excuse” (Ibid). Mueller counters that the financial argument “makes a great talking point” but “shows a basic non-understanding of the work that we do. We don’t sit back and look at the money and see how we can earn more money. We look at how we can best serve these kids - that’s our job” (Mueller 2014). He elaborates:

If someone tells me, ‘Hey APS, you shouldn’t be fighting Amendment 1 because it’ll actually make you money. My response would be that it’s not really about money. That’s okay, but our job, we do want to educate everyone who’s in our district. But just to willingly give up and say, ‘Geez we can no longer serve these kids, let’s let someone else do it, and they’re going to give us money to let the kids [leave]…that just doesn’t…strike a cord with folks that work in education, it just doesn’t seem like a compromise that you really want to make. It really is beyond money, it’s a responsibility (Ibid).

Another tensioned sticking point is over statewide allocation of funding. Ries claims that charters “just need more money…but [they] are operating at less than 80% cost than the districts…[in many cases] somewhere between 60% to 85% [less] than districts” (Ries 2014). Mueller agrees that charters “can be underfunded” and that “it is a challenge” financially (Mueller 2014). However, he acknowledges that:

Charter operators go into this knowing exactly what the landscape looks like. Charter schools in our district, we tell them very clearly what they’re going to get, what historically folks have gotten over the past ten years, these are the buildings we have available, here’s what it’s going to look like so we need to see what you’re five-year plan is going to look like. So we try to make everything known. So really, if they’re underfunded, that’s another question. But if they enter into it with open eyes and know what they’re exactly going to get, and they still move forward…I think that’s a little harder to listen to complaints about not getting enough money (Ibid).

Subsection D: Summary

In an overall sense, this Georgian case study turns advocate’s assertions on its head. The ICB in the state is riddled with politics, according to Professor Ries, and is unable to maintain funding and expertise to authorize well. Moreover, the local incentive and control given to APS has allowed Mueller to oversee a beneficial charter sector that works within the district’s
structure, not beyond it, elevating the potential of Atlanta meeting both promises. This arrangement allows Mueller to focus on children, not finances. More than anything, however, he sees APS’s authorized schools as no different in mission than the traditional ones, taking a page from the portfolio philosophy:

I’ve been here for seven years, and I’ll tell you one thing I’ve found over the time I’ve been here is that if we really want to honor the spirit and the letter of the law and to minimize unpleasant experiences for children, and bad transitions, and really listen to the public, we really have to try and get past opposition. Our board approved them. We have to embrace these [charter] schools (Mueller 2014).
PART THREE
PRACTICES FOR POSTERITY
- Section Eight -
*Our Lessons Learned*

The lessons of these three urban districts in their attempts at quality authorizing clearly have much to teach scholars and educators alike as the literature and practice of charter authorizing matures. In this concluding section, I outline six lessons on that school systems can learn from as they construct structures and implement practices to not only improve outcomes for charter schools, but also settle tensions between districts and charters so that *all schools* – and therefore children – can thrive together.

**Lesson 1: Strong Governmental Oversight Through Authorizing Is Critical To Accountability**

Advocates were misguided in placing such a heavy emphasis on the market to self-regulate the charter world, but righted themselves through the embrace of authorizers as governing oversight bodies. In many ways, the three case studies affirmed advocates’ assertion that quality authorizing would equal better quality charter schools. In Philadelphia, poor authorizing has led to a large, but underperforming sector. With few quality options, parents are unwilling or simply unable to divorce the low performing schools their children are enrolled in.

Charter schools still operate in an educational marketplace. The fact that they are schools of *choice* has not been lost, even as the sector has evolved. But in order for the market to work, there need to be good school options for families to choose from in the first place – and authorizers are the actors that can ensure standards of quality are created and maintained within the system. In D.C., the PCSB has aggressively closed Tier 3 schools at a rate double the national average. And it is consistently focused on moving students into higher quality school seats. Atlanta’s Office of Innovation is able to set clear benchmarks and work together with its high performing charter portfolio. The governing force of an authorizing body is what is necessary to meet the first promise of quality charter schools.
Lesson 2: The Foundation for Authorizers is Resources, the Most Important Criterion

In the debate about what defines a quality authorizer, advocates point to a desire to do the job, the political insulation to focus on data, and adequate resource capacity. All three criteria are ones that advocates contend local districts fall short of. However, as with Philadelphia, D.C., and Atlanta, it is evident that resources are the most critical out of the three.

On the desire factor, independent boards are, by design, singularly dedicated to authorizing. So the “desire” to do so is automatically a positive indicator. But districts like Philadelphia are also moving more towards a portfolio strategy that is pushing forward a “tremendous amount of buy-in in the idea that ‘these are all our kids, these are all our schools’” instead “of seeing [charters] as this whole separate thing over there that’s here to destroy this other thing,” says Nagourney (2014). So one could contend that desire, which is already a difficult criterion to measure, is no longer a factor that automatically works against school districts. Of course, examples such as Georgia’s state ICB confirm that even independent authorizers can lack the motivation and tools to work with for charter schools and hold them to high standards.

On political insulation, there really is not any body in education that is untouched by politics. Says Nagourney on this topic:

I don’t think there’s anything in education that isn’t politically charged. I really don’t. There isn’t. [In some cases] there’s just that one person who you have to make happy. In New Jersey it’s Chris Christie, and he wants to run for president. And he’s really concerned with how his charter schools look. That’s going to drive some decision-making on the ground…

I don’t think there’s a way of separating out politics. Everyone has stakeholders. Everyone is appointed by a governor. You still have political connections, relationships with the governor, you still have to get elected, and you still have your constituents. I think the ideal would be somewhere where people don’t really care about charter schools. I don’t think that is a place that exists just yet (Ibid).
When it comes to the resource question, however, advocates are correct that they are key to authorizer quality. When questioned about whether they think LEAs can be effective authorizers, Medway, Sampson, and Nagourney all replied in the affirmative – provided that they had the resources to do so. “I think that [D.C. Public Schools, the traditional district] could [be a good authorizer]” but “it would take a lot of money to be able to do it right, particularly with the accountability measures,” cautions Medway (2014). At the end of the day, an authorizer requires “the human resources with people” to do the job well (Ibid). “I can’t imagine what [they’re] doing,” Medway observes of the understaffed Philadelphia charter office (Ibid). “I think Philly definitely could be a good authorizer if it devotes the resources to doing it well,” notes Nagourney (2014). Surely, the fate of the SDP’s AQI efforts will depend on whether the district can find the capacity to carry out its reforms effectively.

APS is a dedicated LEA positioning itself as a sharer of best practices and a leader in using a defined performance framework for the fourteen charters overseen by Mueller’s office. The number of staff dedicated to authorization at APS, which oversees just fourteen charters, is of comparable size to that of Philadelphia, which oversees 86 schools. To compare, a extremely high level of personnel at D.C. PCSB undoubtedly contribute to it being known as a well-recognized authorizer that is able to set clear expectations for schools and boldly close a third of them that do not meet standards. This resource piece is imperative to authorizers even wanting to do the job well at a baseline level.

**Lesson 3: Communication as Also An Integral Criterion of Meeting Both Promises**

Communication is an important factor in the fulfillment of both promises. A transparent authorizer is able to leverage its resources to design and implement accountability benchmarks – and then communicate them frankly to operators. And the willingness to communicate between
authorizers and traditional districts is central to building the potential for experiencing shared practices and growth.

For charter schools, clear communication allows for the understanding of what is expected of them. When authorizers have to make high-stakes decisions, or when it seeks to simply help a school improve, transparency accelerates the process of understanding proposed outcomes, be it a school closure or charter expansion. In D.C. and Atlanta, a performance framework and the clear comprehension of criteria within it drive the dialogue over school quality. In Philadelphia, however, there are not only undefined standards for schools (AQI seeks to remedy this), but also closed lines of communication. “I think a lot of the tension has to do with a big lack of communication,” observes Sampson when speaking about his experience as a charter CEO having to deal with the SDP as an authorizer (2014). The charter office is, however, making transparency one of its goals. The district must “be better” at posting meeting information, releasing financial statements, and describing student performance across schools, among many other demands of authorizing, says a staffer (District Staffer I 2014). Philadelphia also is starting to see how better communication of data itself can help with holding schools accountable. “It would be so exciting if…we can have within year attrition and between year attrition numbers for every charter school. And that data is publicly available for everyone,” another SDP staffer excitedly suggests. “That would be such a huge step because that would out there. And you can call out those schools that are losing 30% of their kids in a year” (District Staffer II 2014). Communication means that the marketplace is enriched with information, helping families make decisions, and the authorizer is empowered with defined, communicated expectations that it can then hold schools accountable to.

For district-charter relations, communication is essential to sharing best practices and
problem solving around issues that affect all children. The adoption of the portfolio model is a great example of this in action – and provides hope for the future. “There are budget implications and financial implications that happen on both sides of the fence when there is not communication,” says Jenkins (2014). Thankfully, districts and charters are starting to work together to plan effectively around a shared vision of a system of great schools – beginning with communication. PCSB, as Medway identifies, is in constant contact with its DCPS counterparts, contributing to growing partnerships on an enlarging number of issues such as equity and access (Medway 2014).

It is apt to indicate that the structure in which charters are placed within the district and contracts are formed through a three-party relationship in Atlanta greatly contribute to the sector’s compelling charter-district partnerships in the first place. Without a doubt, Mueller especially understands how communication can contribute to collaboration rather than conflict. Charters that win approval go “through a fairly rigorous application process” and discuss how they are “going to innovate and how that innovation is going to be disseminated across the entire district” (Mueller 2014). Together, charters and APS form “a real relationship” (Ibid).

It is ultimately partnership, not partisanship, which will help charter and traditional schools improve. The act of communicating well will play an important role in that success and should be considered as an integral criterion for strong authorizing and improving district-charter relationships to the entire system’s benefit.

Lesson 4: Sufficient Funding Is Critical to Co-Existence

Funding is a foundational issue for school districts and the ability of the traditional sector to co-exist with charters. Like how an authorizer requires resources to advance its work, districts require sufficient monetary resources as well. A baseline of available resources is required so
that financially, districts and charters are not wrangling over an increasingly dwindling pot of money as they are in Philadelphia. If such funding is not present, stakeholders will be caught up fighting over both the dwindling amount of available resources and the fact that funding is insufficient. And they will never be able to tackle higher-level issues facing children.

“The funding structure isn’t as important as the amount of money. So it’s less about how it’s set up…than if there’s enough dollars being made available for both systems to operate,” claims an SDP staffer (District Staffer I 2014). “It’s all about the money,” asserts Nagourney, (2014). The district staffer alludes to a peer Pennsylvania district to drive home the point:

I still don’t get why Pittsburgh gets $19,000 a student or something like that. They get so much more than we do. I think it’s just the way that the funding structure is set up and Pennsylvania - where Pittsburgh got locked into a certain amount of money but they have a declining student population, so they have that set amount of money now for fewer kids. I’m sure nobody’s sweating bullets about charter expansion in Pittsburgh as they are here. It’s just because the money’s there (District Staffer I 2014).

How resources are fairly allocated is also an important consideration. A district must have the ability to plan out its future financially and manage the resources that go to schools within its city’s context, as traditionalists would argue. Mueller explains that charter schools, potentially by nature, defy the careful planning that has historically gone into school creation:

When we plan to open a new traditional school, it’s part of a long-term plan that considers demographics, movement of populations, enrollment patterns, where people are going. We float a bond, we go forward and get sales tax funding, [and] it is a long strategy and sort of gradual. Charter schools - sometimes they pop up like mushrooms after a spring rain…I think its a mistake to just create schools out of nowhere without having laws in place or rules in place that allow the funding to go where it should (Mueller 2014).

“You can’t have unbridled growth in your district,” he says. “That’s a horrible thing to have” (Ibid). Nagourney says she is someone who “values long term planning, for a city to have one strategic vision with a lot of people working towards it” so she does not “really like the idea that charters would be opening here, there, and everywhere” (Nagourney 2014). Unfortunately,
independent authorizing and SB 1085 would potentially place Philadelphia down that path, removing enrollment caps and allowing for the creation of charter schools (without district approval) that would take from the same funding stream as the one accessed by the SDP. Indeed, the current situation in Philadelphia is a cautionary tale for all. It is important to note, though, that the underlying issue with Philadelphia with SB 1085 is still funding – and the prospect that more charter schools means less money for the SDP because of the way funds are allocated in PA. Traditionalists in Philadelphia would perhaps have less of an issue with this matter if funding were set up the way it is in D.C. and Atlanta. In the cities “where there’s a lot of tension,” says Nagourney, “the funding schedule is set up in a way that penalizes the District” (Ibid). In Washington D.C., the bifurcated model vests power within two parallel governing bodies that have no voting power over one another’s actions splits the guaranteed funding stream for both sectors, minimizing tension and allowing both sides to work together on educational matters. In Atlanta, Amendment 1 softens the blow to districts like APS when charter growth occurs. Both arrangements protect each system’s finances better than the Philadelphia model, which inevitably leads to anxiety over funding.

In short, money matters. All in all, school districts must have a baseline level of available funding where money is not the central prize in a zero-sum fight between advocates and traditionalists. Such battles between adults are not a good sign for children and their educational futures. Mechanisms must be in place to allocate resources across entire school systems, taking into account the needs of all schools. Only then can both sectors not simply survive alongside one another financially, but also grow towards deeper discussions about education.

**Lesson 5: Regardless of the Charter Presence, Districts Must Continue to Improve Themselves**

The charter schools debate has dominated the education sphere across the country. Of
course, this is for good reasoning, for the sector is increasingly growing in market share and influence. However, this phenomenon is also not without reason. Simply put, parents are moving towards charter schools because they, at the very least, perceive them to be better than the ones operated by traditional districts, even though some numbers may tell a different story. Though Nagourney is mentioned above as understanding the fears with unbridled charter growth, she adds that she “agree[s] with the sense of urgency [for] the kind of growth that [charter leaders] are calling for” because “kids don’t want to wait until the school district gets its act together and figures things out. Kids want high-quality options now” (Nagourney 2014). Al Fan, the Executive Director of Charter School Partners expresses in an interview that high-quality charters are “a better use of public money than continuing to invest these dollars into a public education system that does not have the flexibility or the political will to make the significant changes needed to dramatically improve the quality of the lowest performing district schools” (Fan 2014). “I think there’s a real philosophical and financial question over whether the school district should continue to exist as it does,” argues Nagourney. “I personally don’t know how much longer the SDP can survive with a traditional school district model” (Nagourney 2014).

Therefore, school districts must continuously make the effort to improve their side of the sector and make the case for their continued existence in the face of charter growth. Mueller affirms that it is important that districts “make the traditional schools more attractive so people don’t leave them” (Mueller 2014). If not, the traditional district may not earn the right to survive and exist. For all the talk of charter schools, it must not be forgotten that school districts hold responsibility as well. The power to fill the second promise of the charter movement ironically lies ultimately in the hands of traditional schools themselves to act upon the best practices of the charter movement and catalyze improvement.
Educational systems that wish to see both charter and traditional schools flourish should therefore focus on producing a well-resourced authorizing body that sets clear expectations and communicates with all stakeholders, ensure the full and adequate funding of both systems of schools, and take on the responsibility of improving all schools and sharing best practices. There is still much work to be done to meet the promises of charter schools at a national level. But in cities like these across America, progress is being made and lessons are certainly being learned for the benefit of posterity.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

The unprecedented rise of charter schooling as an educational reform effort certainly has shaken the traditions of American public schooling to its core. Conflict is inevitable, especially when there has been a jarring change to the existing system. Today, charters are not only here to stay, but also still growing in both number and market share. As a country, if we are to preserve both the innovations of chartering and hold true to our national commitment to free public education, both systems must find a way to foster a healthy competition among themselves and coexist in providing a safe, high-quality education for all.

“I think in an ideal world,” an SDP official smiles, “districts make decisions that are in the best interests of kids” (District Staffer I 2014). Our education system may never reach a state of ideal perfection, free from the constraints of reality. But finding new pathways and strategies for districts and charters to work together and advance the education of students would be a generous step in the right direction. After all, there are great schools in both the traditional and charter sectors, all leading children on spectacular journeys of learning. As a society, if we can leverage new innovations and American ingenuity to enable more students to receive a quality education, then maybe in the not so distant future, the choice between schools in cities like Philadelphia will not be between good and bad schools, but merely different ones.
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