

The question shouldn't be "charter or traditional?" but rather "How can public policies ensure a supply of good schools – charter, traditional, or something else – to meet the needs of kids in each community in our city?" – Sara Mead, Education Week

1. Every Child Needs and Deserves a High-Quality Education.

All children in the greater Houston area should have access to a good education that will prepare them well for college or career, but currently this is not the case. According to 2015 Children At Risk school rankings based on student achievement and achievement growth:

- ✓ 31% of all elementary schools in the Houston area were rated D or F (vs. half rated A or B).
- ✓ 28% of Houston-area elementary school students attend schools rated D or F (vs. 54% A or B).
- ✓ 30% of the middle school students in the Houston area attend schools rated D or F (vs. 56% A or B).
- ✓ One-third of the high school students in the Houston area were attending D or F schools.

2. This is What Families Want, Too.

Data on the numbers of applications to magnet and charter schools show very strong demand for good schools:

- HISD received almost 72,000 applications for its 18,569 magnet seats for the 2015-2016 school year – nearly four applications per seat. Some programs had more than 30 applicants per seat.
- Despite the growth of charter schools, the sector cannot keep up with demand; Harmony, KIPP, and YES Prep charter systems in the Houston area wait listed 25,200 applications for 2015-16.¹

3. Trying Repeatedly to Turn Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools Cannot Meet This Need.

School turnarounds (e.g., replacing the principal, rehiring no more than 50% of existing staff, changing the instructional model, etc.) have been the default district strategy for trying to change the trajectory of chronically low performing schools over the years. But the track record for turnarounds is weak.² Long-term school struggles often result in steady attrition of students to magnets, charters, etc., leaving behind a disproportionate share of students with significant challenges.

4. Closing Schools Does Not Address the Supply Side of the Equation.

Some leaders argue that chronically low-performing schools should be closed, and HISD has done so periodically over the years. But students who are transferred to other schools as a result of a closure often fall even further behind. And closing schools does not address the supply side of the equation. Communities want *better* schools, not closed schools.

5. Districts Are Trying to Increase the Supply of Quality Seats by Creating New Schools.

HISD has had considerable success in launching new schools with a special focus. Older examples include Challenge Early College High School; new examples include Baylor College of Medicine Academy at Ryan, Energy Institute High School, and numerous others. Some have entry criteria while others are open enrollment (with lottery). Many have attracted diverse students from across the city, and have shown positive achievement results. Even so, the need for seats in quality schools still far exceeds the available supply.

6. Charter Schools Are Trying to Increase the Supply of Quality Seats by Expanding.

Some believe that charter schools are the best solution to the need to expand the supply of seats in high-quality schools, and it is true that high-performing charter schools in Houston and nationally have shown their ability to grow. But there are multiple barriers constraining charter growth. The most significant is the lack of access to facilities and facilities funding. This not only forces charters to use operating dollars to pay for facilities but also leads to inequities. The schools that charters build or acquire often lack libraries, labs, sports

facilities, etc. As a result of these obstacles, the number of high-quality CMOs operating in Houston remains fairly small, and charters are addressing only a fraction of the need for seats in quality schools.

7. But Ad Hoc Charter Growth and Population Shifts Are Causing Inefficiency: Lots of Empty Seats in Struggling District Schools.

Thus we have a situation in which districts and charters are independently seeking to grow the supply of seats in quality schools – in other words, co-existing, but seldom collaborating. While the growth of high-performing charter schools in the Houston area has expanded the supply of school choice options for low-income families, this capacity expansion (combined with changes in population density and resistance to closing schools) has resulted in a glut of empty seats in many public school buildings:

- An estimated 17% of all seats in HISD schools are unoccupied – roughly 46,000 open seats.³
- About half (130) of the district’s 257 schools have at least 100 open seats. Five of HISD’s lowest performing schools appear to be less than half full.
- In the past, HISD has used a small school subsidy to boost funding for small campuses. Many low-performing schools received the subsidy as their enrollment declined, even though extra funding has done little to restore the enrollment or performance of chronically struggling schools.

Operating so many underenrolled schools is a costly (not to mention inefficient) proposition.

8. Should Districts and Charters Collaborate Rather Than Merely Coexist?

The evidence above indicates that both districts and charters are capable of growing the supply of quality schools – but the need is far bigger than either can address alone. Rather than just coexist – that is, continue the current situation, where districts and charters operate in separate spheres – should they collaborate? **In other words, should district and the charter sector leaders join with other community and educational leaders to develop a unified strategy for expanding the supply of quality schools based on need and demand?**

A growing number of urban district leaders believe that the answer is “yes.” As the Center for Reinventing Public Education has observed, “In a growing number of communities, the relationship between charter schools and districts is transforming, from the traditional paradigm of opposition, competition, and indifference to a partnership based on trust and collaboration through a shared mission, shared resources, and shared responsibility.”⁴

9. What Could District-Charter Collaboration Look Like?

Over the past several years, a growing number of urban school leaders across the U.S. have embraced district-charter collaboration in an effort to strategically expand the supply of high-quality school options for families, while using resources more efficiently and effectively.⁵ Options include:

- Sharing information and best practices
- Partnering on certain programs (principal training, teacher professional development, etc.)
- Common application systems to make it easier for families to navigate school choice
- Space sharing, or co-locating charters in underenrolled district schools

10. What Should Houston Do?

Today, many young people in Houston being tragically being cut off from future opportunities at an early age as a result of attending low-performing schools. **It is time for district, charter, higher education, business, and community leaders to rally around a shared commitment to significantly expanding the supply of seats in high-quality schools and figuring out the best way to achieve this goal.**

Why? Because district and charter schools have the same mission. Because collaboration is the best way to expand quality schools, achieve economies of scale, and remove barriers to school choice. The goal is to scale up what works as quickly as possible so that all children get the education they need and deserve.

¹ Families Empowered, March 2016. Note: this reflects the number of applications rather than families.

² The Wallace Foundation, *The School Turnaround Field Guide*, 2010.

³ HISD, *Membership Summary and Detail Report*, Dec. 18, 2015 (Day #80). These figures may increase or decrease as a result of school construction and/or refinement of school capacity formulas and figures.

⁴ Parker Baxter with Elizabeth Cooley, "Mastering Change: When Charter Schools and School Districts Embrace Strategic Partnership," in Robin Lake and Betheny Gross, Eds., *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2011*, Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2012.

⁵ For more details, see: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/press-releases/Pages/new-charter-school-partnerships-101207.aspx>.