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# **THE PROMISE OF PARTNERSHIPS**

**HOW TEXAS SCHOOLS CAN TAKE  
ADVANTAGE OF NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR  
SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION**



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In the 23 years since charter schools were authorized in Texas, the district and charter sectors have worked to improve student outcomes. This work is often in isolation and sometimes in conflict. But innovative district and charter school leaders are reimagining what it means to collaborate, recognizing that the long-term goals they have for students are similar. With a new law aimed at reducing barriers and encouraging collaboration, Texas schools are taking the lead on the path forward for public schools.

## Partnership in Action

In San Antonio ISD, student achievement is the top priority for superintendent Pedro Martinez. With over 90% of students identifying as low-income and many performing below grade level, improvement must be dramatic and immediate.<sup>1</sup> Martinez and his team have rolled out a suite of reforms designed to increase student achievement and prepare students for success in college and career.<sup>2</sup>

One of these bold proposals has been to increase options for students, through both district-run choice schools and partnerships with charter management organizations. In May 2017, the school board approved a partnership with the John H. Woods Charter District to provide specialized educational support to students with social and emotional disorders. SAISD provides facilities and central office support, while John H. Woods hires faculty and uses their curriculum and instructional techniques that have been successful on other campuses.<sup>3</sup> This campus opened at the old Brower Elementary in August 2017 and is currently serving students.

SAISD is familiar with the structure and oversight mechanisms of charter schools; the district has several in-district charter schools in its portfolio of options for students and families. They also manage relationships with other organizations, like the lab school model for Ogden Elementary School, where teacher residents work with master teachers to earn certification and, eventually, a master's degree in teaching.<sup>4</sup> The district's relationship with high-quality charter operators in the area has already influenced practice – SAISD partnered with KIPP to adapt the charter organization's college advising program for district high schools and to provide ongoing professional development for counselors and college advisors. This work has continued with the board's approval of a partnership with charter operator Democracy Prep, which will run one of the district's lowest performing elementary schools.<sup>5</sup>

Relationships like these represent the hope for district and charter school partnerships.

# INTRODUCTION

The relationship between districts and charter schools across the state varies. Some districts have built and maintained sustained relationships with charter schools in the area over the years. Some leadership teams are just now considering the impacts of what a relationship could bring, while still others cannot imagine wading into the political or policymaking process. There are both hard-learned lessons, strong recommendations, and developed models for district and charter leaders to follow, based on work happening in the state and across the country.

This report focuses on the current reality in Texas, the new innovative law, and several models of collaboration, some of which are already in practice in districts across the state. The goal of this report is to raise awareness of this work and to provide a starting place for Texas school leaders and policymakers as they design and implement innovative partnerships that can transform schools for the students they serve.



**HERE IN TEXAS, LEADERS ARE BEGINNING TO WORK TO BUILD SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIPS THAT SERVE THE INTEREST OF ALL PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS.**

## The Current Reality in Texas

Charter schools and school districts in Texas operate largely independent from one another. At best, the two sectors ignore one another. At worst, the relationship is acrimonious, with competition for students and resources turning fierce.

But many districts and charter organizations are beginning to chart a different path. In cities and states across the country, charter schools and districts are working together and finding ways to ensure more students have access to high-quality schools and programs. Here in Texas, leaders are beginning this work to build sustainable relationships that serve the interest of all public school students.

## New Collaboration Legislation

The state plays an important role in facilitating an environment conducive to collaboration through removing barriers and providing incentives to districts and charters to engage in this work.<sup>6</sup>

Senate Bill 1882, passed in the 85th legislative session, provides two incentives for school districts and open-enrollment charter schools to collaborate to serve students.<sup>7</sup> The bill requires potential charter school partners to have academic performance and financial ratings of acceptable or higher for the previous three years. Districts and charter schools that enter into a contractual partnership to collectively serve a group of students are eligible for:

1

### Increased Funding

Schools in the partnership receive the per-pupil funding amount of the charter school or the district, whichever is higher.

2

### Exemption from Sanctions

Partnerships between an open-enrollment charter school or nonprofit and a district school with an unacceptable overall performance rating will receive a two-year pause in specific accountability provisions. Schools in the partnership continue to receive overall and domain performance ratings.

These same incentives for partnership apply to other nonprofit organizations, including institutions of higher education, that partner with school districts to support turnaround work or enhance the choice offerings of districts. Partnerships with non-profit organizations must be submitted for review and approval to TEA.<sup>8</sup> Schools formed under this partnership agreement must be granted a charter under Subchapter C – the type authorized and overseen by the local school district. Additional rulemaking done by TEA guides school districts and partnering entities on the specific timelines and regulations to qualify a partnership for these incentives.<sup>9</sup>

These new opportunities present a chance for district and charter schools to see each other as collaborators, instead of competitors. With flexibility in determining the type of collaboration, district and charter leaders can work together to meet the needs of students in the area.



**ENGAGING IN THIS WORK IS DIFFICULT, BUT DISTRICTS AND CITIES THAT HAVE COMMITTED TO THE WORK ARE EXPERIENCING IMPROVED RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SECTORS.**

## What Collaboration Looks Like

The work of collaboration is local, requiring charter operators and district leaders to engage with one another and find solutions that are in the best interests of all students. Engaging in this work is difficult, but districts and cities that have committed to the work are experiencing improved relationships between sectors. To engage in collaboration, charter schools must give up some of the autonomy they have grown accustomed to, while districts must reframe their thinking of charter schools as competitors.<sup>10</sup>

In Texas, the passage of SB 1882 creates an environment for district and charter school leaders to build relationships that empower school leaders to think creatively about educational opportunities for students. Innovative partnership models are being tested, as leaders work together to provide educational opportunities that meet the diverse needs of students and their families.

The models are as varied as the needs of the students in different communities. This, of course, is by design. Charter schools and school districts in a specific area operate in similar political, geographic, and demographic conditions, allowing them to build on this shared understanding of the context and landscape. Breaking down these silos and sharing hard-earned knowledge with one another is a necessary first step for districts and charter schools that are serious about increasing achievement for all students.

These relationships thrive in an uncomfortable space, with both district and charter leaders ceding some of the control they possess when operating independently. These schools exist on an autonomy continuum that increasingly places decision-making at the school level. These relationships represent a shift to a more decentralized view of school governance.

As required in SB 1882, district and charter leaders will agree on a performance contract that dictates the roles and responsibilities of both entities, along with the performance metrics the school must meet if they are engaging in turnaround work.<sup>11</sup> This becomes the working agreement between the two sectors, tying the autonomy to academic results. This increased autonomy has succeeded in places like Indianapolis, which launched innovative schools that allowed school leaders increased flexibility in exchange for academic results. The policy has garnered the attention of district principals, who are actively choosing to join the innovation partnership network in order to have increased building level autonomy.<sup>12</sup>



**INCREASED AUTONOMY HAS SUCCEEDED IN PLACES LIKE INDIANAPOLIS, WHICH LAUNCHED INNOVATIVE SCHOOLS THAT ALLOWED SCHOOL LEADERS AUTONOMY IN EXCHANGE FOR ACADEMIC RESULTS.**

Existing partnerships have focused on sharing programming, facilities, and training; these collaborations have laid fertile ground for continued innovation. The next section explores several unique partnership structures that have allowed districts and charter schools to emphasize their strengths, share their resources, and bring high-quality options to more students.

# PARTNERSHIP MODELS

## INSTRUCTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Originally conceived as laboratories of innovation, charter schools often create their own academic curriculum, talent management processes, professional development curriculum, and other specific programming to attract and retain students. Charter and district schools offer different curricular options for students, with a focus on STEM, college preparation, the arts, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs, and more. Charter schools and districts can partner to share leadership development programs, college preparation curriculum, and curricular materials that have been successful. Partnering can increase access for students to a curriculum focus that interests them.

1

*Example: Grand Prairie ISD and Uplift Schools operate two schools out of one building, increasing options for students in the neighborhood and the district. Uplift Lee offers an IB curriculum, allowing students and families access to an additional option in their neighborhood. Teachers and administrators from both schools work together and learn from each other, and the schools share resources like the library, cafeteria, and electives.*

## REPLICATING HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Many high-performing charter schools lack capacity to scale their efforts. Charter schools often spend significant time and money securing facilities for operations, which can slow the expansion of high-quality schools. Collaborating with districts can allow charters to gain access to needed facilities, while the expansion allows the district and its students access to more high-quality seats.

*Example: Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST) is one of Denver Public Schools' (DPS) highest performing charter school networks. With a 100% college acceptance rate and high academic performance ratings on the district's evaluation framework, DSST has brought high-quality seats to underserved neighborhoods across the city. DPS has recognized and rewarded that work with a contract that will expand DSST to 22 schools on 11 campuses, serving a quarter of Denver's middle school and high school students.<sup>13</sup>*

2



# PARTNERSHIP MODELS

## TURNING AROUND LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

When district schools have underperformed, high-performing charter schools can step in to work with districts to turn around performance. While previous iterations of this model may have been forced, more district and charter leaders are collaborating around the goal of increased performance at persistently struggling schools.

3

*Example: Newark Public Schools and Uncommon Schools charter network have partnered to turn around some of the lowest-performing schools in the district. Knowing that the charter operator had lengthy waiting lists and was in need of buildings to expand, district leaders agreed to turn over an elementary school to the network, with the condition that any student that wanted to stay, could. The turnaround worked – by year two the school outperformed affluent districts across the state. This success led to a sustained partnership and allowed the two sectors to continue to partner on other efforts, including Uncommon Schools sharing their literacy curriculum and leading professional development for district teachers.<sup>14</sup>*

## SERVING SPECIFIC POPULATIONS OF STUDENTS

Many charter schools are designed to support a specific population of student or to teach in a distinct style. These schools have worked to refine their curriculum and instructional strategies, and partnering can help expand this work to more students. Some charter schools have been designed to serve students with emotional and behavioral challenges or addictions. Others work with students who have non-traditional schedules, such as athletes or teen parents. Charter schools and districts can partner to serve more of these populations of students, either through specialized programs within district schools or through partnership schools.

*Example: STEM Preparatory Academy, a charter school in Nashville, Tennessee, partners with Metro Nashville Public Schools to serve district students through the Nashville Newcomer Academy. This program serves 100 students new to the country with the goal of advancing academic achievement and social integration of new arrival students and bolstering the instructional capacity in schools serving English learners.<sup>15</sup> STEM Prep was chosen to be the new site of the Newcomer Academy because of its strong track record of getting English Language Learner students reading at grade level.<sup>16</sup> Through this partnership, the district has leveraged the specific expertise built up at STEM Prep and expanded its impact to support more students from across the city.*

4

# CONCLUSION

These partnership models only scratch the surface of the potential of collaboration in the public school space. Across the country, from Denver to New York City, Cincinnati to Tulsa, district and charter leaders are navigating the tensions and opportunities that abound when engaging in this work. To do this work is not easy. To break down the silos between charter operators and school districts takes enormous will, trust, and determination from both sides. In Texas, bold leaders across the public school spectrum have begun this work to engage constructively with each other to provide options that support student learning and growth.

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