

# A third way for more charter schools

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The debate over charter schools is too often defined as a choice between “full speed ahead” and “slamming on the brakes.” In actual practice, school districts face important trade-offs between realizing the benefits of charter schools and incurring the costs and inefficiencies that result from hosting those schools. Each school district (especially those with stable or declining enrollments) should develop a thoughtful charter-school plan to maintain the proper balance. Also, the state should amend the current charter-school law to a strategy that works for all of our public school students.

When a school district’s enrollment is increasing, it is easier to introduce a charter school. Under those conditions, the charter school fills a clear need. When a school district’s enrollment is stable or declining, however, the charter school presents a challenge. Because the state funding formula calls for “money to follow the child,” the school district usually must plan to close one existing school for each new charter that opens.

As we saw in Providence last year, this process is divisive and painful. A gradual transition can create even greater costs, as it may require the school district to postpone closing a school (and realizing those savings) until the new charter school is fully enrolled.

One way to avert some of these transition issues is to convert an existing district school into a charter school, a process that Providence is trying out this year. Such a conversion lets the school gain new autonomy and flexibility, while retaining as many of the school’s existing educators and students as wish to stay.

This fall’s experience, however, revealed two major issues with this alternative. First, the school’s budget may change significantly under the calculations of money follows the child; for example, the School Department estimates that the Spaziano Elementary School’s conversion will add \$2.9 million each year to the school’s budget while subtracting that amount from the School Department’s budget for other schools.

Second, the state’s current rules require seats for charter schools to be awarded through a district-wide lottery, thus forcing difficult choices on conversion candidates with a strong neighborhood identity, while increasing transportation costs.

More generally, charter schools inevitably bring financial inefficiencies to a host school district. For the past two decades, the state has encouraged school districts to consolidate, in order to reduce the cost of redundant superintendents, personnel offices, food-service contracts and the like. And yet, every time we open a new charter school, we create a new “local education authority” responsible not only for its own curriculum and personnel, but also for all of the operational expenses the state is trying to reduce by consolidating school districts.

The Providence School Department has a superintendent, a central office, a human-resources department, finance officials and other infrastructure to serve more than 20,000 students. This investment is a fixed cost that becomes cheaper per student as the district expands, but more expensive when populations decline or when students leave for charter schools.

Other variable costs are stickier than they can or should be; for example, if a school loses half of a class of children to a charter, it cannot lay off half a teacher, not to mention the impact of the no-layoff clause in the current Providence teachers’ contract.

For school districts with tight finances and steady enrollments, every new charter school creates both short-term transition costs and longer-term financial inefficiencies that must be absorbed by reductions in the resources available to the remaining children in the district. There can be direct benefits for the children who attend the charter schools, and there may be indirect benefits for the children who remain in the school district, but it is a

complex interaction that must be managed carefully.

With this in mind, school districts should plan their expansion of charter schools. Boston recently was recognized by the Gates Foundation for developing a compact between district and charter schools to coordinate calendars, training, facilities planning and the like. Also, improvements in the state's charter-school law can smooth these transitions. The money-follows-the-child formula can be modified (perhaps with additional state aid) to address the short-term transition costs while ensuring sufficient resources for new start-ups.

Other states (such as Georgia) let charter schools define neighborhood-based "attendance zones" as a priority for student enrollment. Rhode Island could follow this example, especially for in-district charter schools.

Boston also provides a model for how school districts can empower their own schools to assume the autonomy and responsibility of charters without the dislocations and inefficiencies of the charter process. For instance, Boston has a network of "pilot schools" that can serve neighborhoods or the entire city, with budgeting and staffing autonomy, but a relationship with the operational services that can be provided more efficiently at the district level.

If we can create central offices that provide shared operational services for different charter schools and/or school districts, we can realize the savings and efficiencies that have largely eluded the consolidation movement over the past decades. If we can then combine regional operational services with the encouragement of individual school variations, we can reap the charter movement's benefits of educational diversity and experimentation without undermining the foundation of resources available to the other children in our public schools.

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