

The Organizational Capacity to Implement

Scaling the New Orleans
Charter Restart Model

February, 2016



Updated September, 2016

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Acknowledgments

The CREDO evaluation team is keenly aware that this report was only possible because of many helping hands. We wish to express our appreciation and indebtedness to the following groups and individuals:

The Louisiana Department of Education and the Tennessee Department of Education for supporting the evaluation with data sharing agreements and helpful guidance throughout the data acquisition, dataset development and data quality assurance steps of our work;

The staffs of the Recovery School District, Achievement School District and New Schools for New Orleans for continuous support throughout the year and for the candor and transparency during numerous informal and formal interviews;

The executives of the i3 Charter Management Organizations for extensive sharing about their operations, plans and experiences;

The community members who offered their own perspectives about current directions in education reform in Louisiana and Tennessee.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ASD	Achievement School District
BESE	Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
i3	Investing in Innovation
LDOE	Louisiana Department of Education
NOLA	New Orleans, Louisiana
NSNO	New Schools for New Orleans
OCAT	Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool
OPSB	Orleans Parish School Board
RSD	Recovery School District
TCSI	Tennessee Charter School Incubator
TDOE	Tennessee Department of Education
USEd	United States Department of Education

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Introduction

The Scaling the New Orleans Charter Restart Model project is a five-year collaboration between the Recovery School District of the State of Louisiana and New Schools for New Orleans, a nonprofit charter school support organization funded by the Investing in Innovations (i3) program of the Office of Innovation and Improvement of the United States Department of Education.¹ An independent evaluation of the collaboration was a requirement of the grant to the Recovery School District (RSD) and New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) which served as the agency of record for the project.

The evaluation is limited to the specific components of the Charter Restart Model which operates within a larger set of policies and practices in New Orleans. It does not extend to the full array of reform efforts that have occurred; instead, its focus is on the fidelity to the project design and implementation of its various components over the course of the five-year grant period.² The evaluation consists of three related studies. An Implementation Analysis tracks the transitions of schools as they move through the charter restart process and reemerge as schools in a charter management organization (CMO) portfolio. The focus of that study is a process evaluation consisting of repeated interviews and observations at the school level to identify the milestones and challenges that new teams of educators and leaders face when restarting a school. The second study is an Impact Analysis focused on the academic progress and other outcomes of the students whose schools have undergone transition via the Charter Restart Model. Careful design of methodology and analysis yields insight into the paths students take and the impact their choices have on their learning. The third and final study of the evaluation is an Organizational Capacity Analysis of the key program partners of the Charter Restart Model: RSD, NSNO and the CMOs tapped to lead the transitions of schools. The third study also includes the Achievement School District in Tennessee and the CMOs in Memphis and Nashville that served as the site for replicating the Charter Restart Model in a new setting as a preliminary test of the scalability of the model.

This Organizational Capacity Analysis is the final report of the third strand of the evaluation. The report summarizes the analysis and findings from four years of studying the institutional capacities of the participating partners in the Scaling the New Orleans Charter Restart Project.

This report follows the primary agencies that drove the New Orleans Charter Restart Model from conception to reality to capture their experience. The sheer scale and scope of the proposed change is unique among the funded programs in i3. The

organizing idea -- that a system of incentives and supports can be created in which high-performing charter management organizations use their flexibility, proximity, capacity and persistence to successfully restart failing schools—was ambitious and daring. The analysis presented in this report details positive progress on balance. Over the past four years, the program partners have successfully implemented the full set of components of the Charter Restart Model in New Orleans. In Tennessee, the Achievement School District (ASD) has fully implemented many of the components and, with supplemental funds from the Louisiana project budget, increased the number of school restarts it could support. The evaluation can safely conclude that the project partners fully complied with their grant commitments. More important, in both locations, there is new infrastructure to maintain the progress achieved to date and stimulate further school improvements.

The landscape in New Orleans and Tennessee looks different today as a result of the Charter Restart Model. In New Orleans, all but two of the restart grants were awarded, leading to the restart of 13 schools, chosen by awarding operating privileges to CMOs with track records of success with similar students. In Tennessee, grants were made to 12 schools, eight of which are included in this evaluation. NSNO and RSD secured an array of school and CMO supports, ranging from professional development to strategic planning to coaching and thought partnership on day-to-day operating challenges.

Together, RSD and NSNO established ongoing community standards for school quality, including academic performance targets, community targets for growing the number of high quality seats in the city and ensuring equity of access and support for students who by virtue of their education profile are vulnerable to marginalization.

The Charter Restart Model also succeeded in the final area of dissemination and replication. Educators across the country know about the Charter Restart Model through a variety of dissemination tools such as written guides, direct technical assistance and participation in conferences and meetings across the country. As a result, other communities have adopted features of the Charter Restart Model and more are considering it. One replication site was launched in Tennessee to serve Memphis and Nashville. A total of twelve schools were transitioned as charter restarts.

While the grant period ends on a positive trajectory, the experience in both Louisiana and Tennessee was full of challenges and stumbles. These individual events deserve attention, not for the purpose of assigning blame, but to illuminate how complicated and iterative the work of systems change is. It demands not only diligence and persistence but also a degree of humility and abiding commitment to the end goals to recognize missteps and to take corrective action. The full range of actions and results receive attention in this report so that other actors in other communities can be aware of the

sorts of issues that might arise if they were to undertake similar initiatives and, hopefully, to leverage the learning from this project and start from a more effective point.

As the lead project partners admit, there has been less success on the desired impacts the goals were intended to create. Some of the responsibility stems from decisions by RSD and NSNO to retreat on some elements of the Charter Restart strategy at various points over the course of the project. The pressure to launch the project quickly meant that critical planning and coordination never happened. Early intentions to have open and continuing dialogue with the community shifted to a more reserved posture. Changes in the selection process led to the launch of three schools that were chaotic and unstable, and eventually two were separated from the project. Some schools were permitted a gradual path to building their new school, which led to strong starts, but sustaining the early gains has proved a challenge. Those schools that were restarted with full grade spans have experienced more challenges during start-up and continue to struggle. The development and support of CMO and school leaders have proved both vital and difficult to provide in a consistent and effective manner. As a result of these and other factors, the overall academic performance of the schools under the Charter Restart Model have not met their performance targets to this point but several have demonstrated the ability to refocus their efforts and post modest improvements. In addition, the decision to allow restarts to open with an entry grade and grow an additional grade each year and delays in the closing/restarts of some of the schools have delayed the date by which the Charter Restart Model could reach the full number of students it committed to serve.

The challenges that were identified in the ASD replication of the Charter Restart Model in many ways mirror the experience in New Orleans. The schools that have been restarted in Tennessee have followed a similar performance path, which lends additional evidence to the collective view in New Orleans that full restarts are more difficult than starting a school from scratch. This finding is more troubling in Memphis and Nashville, for two reasons. The communities do not have strong experience with school improvement nor, until the final year of the grant, local resources to support charter school operations to help them improve. In addition, the smaller number of charter schools in those cities means that each school carries more weight in the ongoing policy environment; for them, the spotlight is brighter and hotter.

As the formal grant period of the Charter Restart Model draws to a close, several positive changes form the legacy of the project. Ten charter management organizations have stepped up to take on the difficult challenge of restarting schools that have extended histories of not serving their students well. The work of school turnaround has shown itself to be harder and more protracted than anyone expected, but most of the schools and their CMOs remain steadfast and focused on adapting to meet the needs of their

students. The additional infrastructure investments to assure equal access to high-quality schools for all students, protect all students with equitable policies and assure the sustained drive to improve the quality of schools are critical backstops for continued forward momentum. These changes have built the awareness and confidence of the public that have broadened political and civic support for strengthening public education.

Study Approach

The Organizational Capacity Analysis was motivated by keen interest in the decisions and actions of the key partners as they took the Charter Restart Model from concept to reality. The massive scale of the Charter Restart Model required both RSD and NSNO to adapt their prior structures and functions as the various programmatic components became operational. New policies and practices demanded new competencies of RSD and NSNO staff in order to effectively support the Charter Restart Model. And both entities were required to coordinate extensively with each other and with the CMOs that operated the new schools for the program to achieve the three goals it was committed to pursue:

Goal 1: Build the capacity to incubate and expand charter restart operators for a total of 19 restarts in New Orleans and eight restarts in Tennessee.

Goal 2: Provide a permanent infrastructure to sustain continuous improvement in school quality.

Goal 3: Scale Strategy by codifying and replicating the New Orleans Charter Restart Model.

Each of the goals required complex program and policy strategies, targeted to achieve specific results that were needed to build the entire Charter Restart Model. As shown in Figure 1 below, the goals were supported by a set of subordinate initiatives, each of which had its own array of objectives, resource requirements, activities and outputs.

Figure 1: Charter Restart Model Goals and Model Components

1 Capacity to Expand Restart Operators	2 Provide Infrastructure to Sustain Restarts	3 Proof of Scalability
Central Infrastructure and Incubation Support	Collect and Analyze Data	Creation of Dissemination Resources
Incubate New Charter Via NSNO Process	Build Community Support Through Liasons	Provide Technical Assistance to Other Communities
	Twice Annual Reviews to Monitor Performance	Replicating the Charter Restart Model in Tennessee
	Increase Parent Awareness of School Performance	
	Convene Turnaround Community to Solve Problems	

The empirical basis of this Organization Capacity Analysis is drawn from four years of repeated formal interviews with RSD, ASD and NSNO leaders, program staff in each organization and CMO leaders who led the transitions of the charter restart schools. The interviews were structured to address comprehensively and consistently the perceptions, expectations and actions of the various players as the Charter Restart Model was launched and matured.

Behind the interviews lies a detailed set of hypotheses, question domains and question sets that map to the goals and program components of the Charter Restart Model. We used the Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool (OCAT) framework developed by McKinsey & Company.³ The OCAT starts with the assumption that new aims require new capacity within organizations. Those aims present a struggle for organizations as they demand strategic, structural and functional change to meet different requirements. OCAT maps the strategic, tactical and functional details of an organization, as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: The Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool Framework



We used the OCAT as an inquiry road map -- if NSNO and RSD were attempting the bold and new approach to school improvement, what changes did they effect internally and

in collaboration with other entities to create the enhanced capacity to act and assure their success? We made no judgment about what the specific changes should be, but the OCAT directed our attention to those areas where effective change was likely to occur.

The analysis presented in this report explores two related themes. The first theme addresses the degree to which the design of the Charter Restart Model was correctly specified for the goals it was expected to achieve. In most large-scale program initiatives, there are gaps or overlaps in the original design that require attention as implementation proceeds. Every large-scale initiative deserves some discretion to adapt the original design either because it becomes obvious that some feature or other doesn't suit its intended purpose or because circumstances evolve to make original choices obsolete. With the insight afforded by time, it is possible to discern how well the original design provided the right combination of programmatic elements, fiscal resources and guidance to create the desired impact in New Orleans and Tennessee.

The second theme addresses the ability of the project partners to faithfully implement the Charter Restart Design and its adjustments over the nearly five-year grant. This second

theme recognizes that the commitments made in the proposal to the Investing in Innovations grant program required new policies, programs and practices in the sponsoring agencies. Even where some elements of the design predated the start of the Charter Restart Model project,

The results of the Organizational Capacity Analysis show that the partners used the original design of the Charter Restart Model as a general blueprint for the various program components. As they encountered challenges or obstacles, they flexed the design to adapt to the circumstances.

modifications or integration with newly implemented components were needed to make the whole functional. As the adage goes, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got." The capacity of the partners to grow or adapt their internal operations and external relations to build the Charter Restart Model in many ways was more important than the design itself.

The results of the Organizational Capacity Analysis show that the partners used the original design of the Charter Restart Model as a general blueprint for the various program components. As they encountered challenges or obstacles, they flexed the design to adapt to the circumstances. In several instances, a series of accommodations, each incremental in nature, culminated in an outcome that was inconsistent with the aims of the initiative. Ultimate success depended on additional course corrections. The analytic

findings are presented below, organized by the three overarching goals of the Charter Restart Model.

Goal 1 Findings

At the end of the i3 grant, a total of 25 schools were closed by the RSD and ASD and restarted by charter management organizations. From a purely functional perspective, this result provides evidence that the program partners, RSD, ASD and NSNO, sufficiently managed their resources of talent, time, tactics and tangible resources to complete the transition of 25 schools in New Orleans and Tennessee. This accomplishment is noteworthy and satisfies a portion of the commitment that is embodied in the goal.

A second part of this commitment was that the restarted schools would have academic gains that put them on a trajectory to be much improved. In Louisiana, changes in the state accountability reports provided a clear way to think about the desired outcome: the restarts would be successful if their performance earned a grade of “C” or better. On a year-to-year basis, this means that the academic gains for each restart had to be positive and significantly better than the prevailing average of other schools in the community. NSNO used the metric of a 0.1 standard deviation difference in academic gains compared to the community average by the end of the second year of operation as the evaluation criterion. During the grant period, NSNO pivoted its performance target to having its supported schools rated as a “B” in the state systems or showing an average growth of 0.2 standard deviations above the community average. In Tennessee, the outcome for the schools was to be included in the top 25 percent of schools in the district within five years. As presented in the accompanying Report on the Impact of the Charter Restart Model on Student Performance, this portion of the Goal 1 commitment has not yet been met. It bears noting that the impact portion of the evaluation was granted an extension that will continue study of the schools for another two years, in recognition of the staggered starts of the restart schools.

A corollary commitment involved support for the development of three CMOs over the course of the grant, two in New Orleans and one in Tennessee. New CMOs were originally envisioned as completely new entities to the ecosystem that began with a multischool strategy that was implemented one school at a time. Providing support for successful school replication and support and guidance on building the central administrative functions was justified in the belief that broadening the number of strong CMOs would lead to more local education leaders stepping up to assume the work of restarting schools.

Each of the commitments was explored in the final analysis. The ways the Charter

Restart Model has succeeded and fallen short in its pursuit of Goal 1 are presented in the following.

Institutional Arrangements



DESIGN

In Louisiana, the Department of Education has responsibility for the delivery of public primary and secondary education. It serves as the administrative arm of the state government, overseeing the operations of local education agencies (LEAs) and carrying out the policies that are set by the statewide policymaking group: the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE).

Under state law, BESE and the LEAs are given the legislative authority to grant charters to aspiring operators under a number of conditions. This function is referred to as authorizing and covers application review, creation of the terms and conditions of school operation, monitoring performance during the term of a charter and deciding the disposition of the school at the end of its term: closure or renewal for another term. If warranted, the authorizer can intervene during the term of a charter if it finds serious problems with a school such as financial mismanagement, poor academic performance or legal infractions.

The Recovery School District (RSD) was created in 2003 by state law with the authority to take over failing schools anywhere in the state and pursue a range of possible actions. RSD can manage improvement plans, transition failing schools to charter schools or close the schools at its discretion. If schools are restarted as charter schools, BESE serves as the authorizer. Initially, the Recovery School District was operated in an autonomous fashion, but since 2013 it has been more closely aligned with the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE). As part of that realignment, RSD has actively divested itself of any direct-run schools.

New Schools for New Orleans was founded in 2006 with a mission to train leaders and incubate charter schools in the years immediately following Hurricane Katrina. Its efforts led to incubating 11 schools and awarding start-up grants to two others that opened between 2008 and the start of the Charter Restart initiative in 2011.

The design of the Charter Restart Model was structured as a public-nonprofit partnership among the RSD, NSNO and existing or aspiring charter management organizations, with LDOE and BESE serving in their usual roles. In many areas, the roles and responsibilities were clearly delineated. The decision to close underperforming schools

was the responsibility of the RSD, though key officials in LDOE and NSNO reported that they offered input and consultation. Recruitment of CMOs to apply for permission and resources to assume the restarted school initially was a duty for NSNO in New Orleans. Selection of restart operators based on a thorough vetting process was shared by RSD and NSNO. Once an “i3” selection was made, NSNO assumed the duty to set the terms of the grant which usually involved commitments to strengthen areas of the CMO’s structure or operations that the selection process showed as needing improvement. NSNO monitored the grant award, following the restart as it recruited new students, hired staff and opened its doors.

Responsibility for other areas of the design was less clearly defined. One key area, discussed below, was community engagement during the school closure and restart operator selection processes; both RSD and NSNO reported in the first year of the grant that they had key responsibilities. Program and budget reporting was another area that received little attention in the initial design -- RSD and NSNO both had need for information from CMOs but the scope and the formats were not coordinated at the outset.

Figure 3: The Dual Role of the CMO



The decision to award CMO operators the responsibility to restart failing schools built on earlier restart efforts in New Orleans. Three prior restarts conducted by three charter school operators had provided initial signals of feasibility to the concept. The decision to make the restart concept the keystone of the i3 proposal marked two notable shifts in the delivery of public education in New Orleans (and eventually in Tennessee), with important implications. First, it placed each CMO in a difficult duality, as shown in Figure 5. A CMO must be successful as an operator of schools that for decades had

not performed well. At the same time, CMOs had to provide a wide array of “central office” supports and functions but without the resources or scale economies of a typical district. Either one of these roles would represent a herculean endeavor; requiring both simultaneously was viewed by national and state education policy leaders as daunting. This was especially challenging for the new CMO entities that were expected to build a successful turnaround and CMO-level functions at the same time. Second, naming the CMOs as the agents of school reform devolved much of the responsibility for academic success to them while preserving the integrity of the i3 partner organizations.

The new arrangement created a portfolio of risk for the program leads. In some ways, having a number of CMO providers each trying to turn around schools was a good hedge on the risk; some CMOs would likely be more successful than others. But the downsides of the strategy were the unknown odds that none of the CMO turnaround operators would have the organizational wherewithal to bring forward the necessary combination of staffing and resources required to produce successful results; that is, that the level of effort, however well-intentioned, would simply not be sufficient to the task. Moreover, the bargain was asymmetric: any failure would give NSNO and RSD an arm’s-length distance (despite any short-run public relations impacts), while any success would be shared by the CMOs and the program partners.



IMPLEMENTATION

The institutional configuration of the Charter Restart Model in Louisiana had a number of positive aspects that fostered efforts to improve the quality of public schools in New Orleans. The pre-existing legislative and regulatory framework of the Recovery School District had most of the complex policies associated with school takeover already worked out. Having already run the political gantlet of its inception, the RSD had legitimacy despite its unpopularity. NSNO likewise was a known entity, albeit with its own reputation challenges as a “new” entrant to the education scene in New Orleans. It also leveraged the support of a range of state and national players such as the State Superintendent of Instruction and several national foundations, which highlighted New Orleans in a larger national conversation about school improvement, even though the endorsements were viewed by some sectors of the community as unwanted intrusions. While the RSD and NSNO continued to evolve over the five years of the grant, the Charter Restart Model was able to build on those foundations. Having much of the start-up work behind them was a boon to their ability to ramp up the Charter Restart Model.

Project Management

DESIGN

It is important to note that the i3 proposed program was an evolution of earlier restart efforts that occurred after Hurricane Katrina. The program scheme that NSNO and RSD advanced in their proposal -- to integrate the closing of underperforming schools in the RSD and “restart” them as charter schools operated by high-performing CMOs -- formalized school transformation practices that before occurred on an ad-hoc basis. The particular innovation of the i3 proposal -- to link together school closures and CMO-managed restarts -- was not a well-established practice in New Orleans. While from the start the RSD and NSNO had alignment on the ultimate outcome of high-quality seats for New Orleans’ students, the scale of the proposed program required a wide-ranging set of components: negotiated alignment of strategies and tactics, clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, integration of policies and procedures, tight coordination of action, and ongoing attention to the partnership that the i3 grant created.

IMPLEMENTATION

The arc of the i3 initiative was uneven and at times negative in the early years. Leadership of the i3 project did not have adequate planning time or insight into the degree of change that would be required of their organizations in order to assure faithful implementation of the model. They underestimated the degree of new programmatic development that would be needed. The initial and ultimately incorrect posture of NSNO and RSD was, “We got this.”

Leadership of the i3 project did not have adequate planning time or insight into the degree of change that would be required of their organizations in order to assure faithful implementation of the model.

These challenges were exacerbated by the pressure for rapid implementation in order to assign a first cohort of restart operators for the 2011-2012 school year. Of necessity, key components of the design were crafted and deployed in haste. There was no time for pre-testing or forecasting of possible conflicts; examples are explained later in the report.

Many of the required program elements, including data systems, CMO development and school supports, were provided in ways that hindered the capacity of the organizations to integrate them into the larger set of activities. The program subcontracted key features of the design to outside providers without clear delineations

of the scale and scope of requirements. Due to staffing issues, when the contracts ended, the program partners had no immediate capacity to replicate the previously outsourced support. They also assumed that their own existing organizational resources would be adequate when deployed in new school contexts. Data systems were not in place for nearly two years. These components were important resources whose absence was felt.

As a result, the first 18 months of the initiative were uneven, with some program elements well-designed, some less so, some implemented well, others less so. NSNO and RSD

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held a few “step back” meetings in the first two years to assess the efficacy of the model and review the progress to date, but these meetings were not continued throughout the

grant. NSNO continued these check-ins, but as the organization expanded to embrace other opportunities such as managing a Teacher Incentive Fund grant, the focus on the details of the Charter Restart Model receded. Consequently, contingency planning or backwards reflection—specifically about the efficacy of the Charter Restart Model — occurred sporadically, so opportunities to anticipate obstacles or learn from experience were only partially embraced.

This is not to suggest that there were no adjustments to the model over time. As documented elsewhere in this report, NSNO and RSD each changed several of their strategies and tactics over the course of the grant. However, both organizations were drawn in other directions

by competing priorities, some of which were outside the control of the organizations. Problems and challenges that the restart operators

Managing the Charter Restart Model required ongoing coordination and problem solving. Maintaining healthy collaborations was an important part of that effort.

confronted were treated by NSNO as specific examples of more general issues confronting the wider community of charter operators; in doing so, the chances to refine the specific details of the Charter Restart Model were missed.

Managing the Charter Restart Model required ongoing coordination and problem-solving. Maintaining healthy collaborations was an important part of that effort. The partnership between the RSD and NSNO teams was a bit rocky at the beginning but weathered well over the grant. In the first year of the program, the executives of the RSD

and NSNO had different expectations about the grant which caused friction between the partner organizations. Some of the difference was substantive: the RSD superintendent unilaterally made public commitments about the use of i3 funds that were both invalid and noncollaborative. Other aspects were stylistic: the organizations initially had different perceptions about the optics of their actions.

These differences were largely resolved by the departure of both individual leaders within the first twelve months of the project. The next set of executives began their roles with a different commitment to the partnership. The commitment was inherited and maintained through subsequent leadership changes. Subsequent interviews with both sets of actors identified formal and informal channels that kept communications flowing. Leaders in both organizations spoke positively about leaders in the other. RSD and NSNO maintained a regular schedule of meetings throughout the grant which allowed issues to be addressed quickly and without escalation.

Over the four-plus years of the i3 project, several important changes occurred that shifted the focus of the grant and its targets. Transitions or absences among the leadership in RSD, NSNO and ASD caused uncertainty and lack of responsiveness at important moments. For example, there was considerable churn in the first 18 months of the grant in the position of finance officer at NSNO. Uneven staffing led to considerable confusion with the CMOs about financial reporting and incomplete documentation of grant activities. Gaps in the position of the communications manager also left the leadership of NSNO to cope with community resistance without professional guidance. Moreover, halfway through the project, the RSD made significant shifts in tactics and operation—deciding to avoid building out a fully functional parallel central office to manage a diminishing portfolio of schools. RSD moved to accelerate the divestiture of its portfolio of failed schools as quickly as possible; it restructured to a much smaller organization, causing a consequent shift in focus with respect to the i3 grant. Widening the focus of RSD to a statewide perspective (to include managed turnarounds in districts as geographically dispersed as Baton Rouge and Caddo Parish) meant RSD began expecting districts to “own their problems” and take action with RSD in the background rather than relying on RSD as a supplementary operator. RSD in New Orleans then turned to ensuring that charter schools met their obligations with Special Education 504 plans, shared in a common application process, and adopted a centralized review of expulsion cases.

NSNO also saw its share of transitions. The organization had three CEOs in four years. Importantly, the individuals brought distinctly different styles to the position, which influenced the reception of the organization in the city. The chief financial officer role churned for the first two years, became stable for three years and recently turned over again. Critical staffing for communications was not consistent; when absent, the profile of

NSNO in the community was less strategic than it was with communication guidance.

The different ways that RSD, NSNO and the CMOs described the Charter Restart Model over the grant period is illuminating. The perspective of RSD officials at the outset was that the i3 CMO leaders were “the experts,” based on their operation of existing schools. The CMOs had unfettered access to teachers and students and could recognize problems and respond with solutions more rapidly. Even if those CMO leaders had no experience with restarts, the sense was that their problem-solving skills could expand to the new challenges. Staff of the RSD spoke of the CMOs as leading the reform effort and considered them as close if not equal partners. Over time, the perspective of the RSD evolved to consider its role to be a portfolio manager. The CMOs who had restarted closed schools do not retain any distinct status in the portfolio; they are judged along with other operators using common accountability measures. Issues and challenges that a few of the CMOs experienced were generalized to the full community of school operators and solutions were crafted for the wider audience of schools. At the start of the program, NSNO staff saw

the Charter Restart Model as having the potential to be a national exemplar,

...the leaders of the CMOs who received i3 grants never saw themselves as part of a larger program or initiative.

particularly in urban communities. Staff expressed the expectation that the i3-funded CMO leaders would share in a collective identity as restart operators and possibly inspire other networks to follow suit. It was commonly believed that CMOs that were “turnaround operators” were taking on a challenge that exceeded the prevailing expectations of opening and operating strong schools and as such deserved special status. Project leaders in the early years used language like “exceptional” and “rugged” to describe the necessary attributes of the successful restart CMO. As the challenges of the restarts became apparent and efforts to recruit new applicants for the last handful of grants faltered, the terms that NSNO used became more pragmatic, focusing on the “heavy lift” that had previously been opaque.

Only one NSNO team member saw the Charter Restart Model in terms of the reallocation of risk; he acknowledged that the reputations of the participating CMOs were on the line. Interestingly, he did not believe that NSNO shared in that exposure. Eventually, his viewpoint was overturned. In the last two years of the grant, the new NSNO co-leaders made several statements about their sense of responsibility to the community and the i3 schools since the CMOs were shouldering the turnaround efforts.

With two exceptions, the leaders of the CMOs who received i3 grants never saw themselves as part of a larger program or initiative. There was a lack of identity or affiliation to the “i3 community” in New Orleans, and even less so in Tennessee. While

they were candid about the challenges inherent in doing full restarts, they did not see themselves or their organizations as a new vanguard to improving public education. They considered the Charter Restart Model only as a source of funding for their growth plans.

It was not difficult to see which CMO leaders recognized the new arrangement of risk for performance and the implications it created. What is perhaps more noteworthy is the fact that only a few CMOs appeared to grasp the bargain they had taken on. The motivation to alter the quality of education for the students the CMOs served was universal, but the risk of doing so in an environment where the array of student and educator supports was limited was either less well-understood or not acknowledged. In the first two years of the Charter Restart program, four of the first eight CMO leaders spoke openly about the risk they had assumed by joining the project. As discussed later, a few took steps to mitigate their risk. As time passed, more of the leaders acknowledged the skewed distribution of risk.

Much of the evolution of the Charter Restart Model was tied to a growing understanding that the risks assumed by the CMOs when they agreed to undertake a school transformation had been underestimated. As discussed in the following sections, as the implementation of the original design unfolded, its strengths and weaknesses were revealed.

To the credit of all the continuing staff, in the last 24 months of the project, refinements to practice stabilized the initiative -- by returning to core values and ensuring their incorporation into key funding decisions, by diversifying the supports available to CMO and school leaders, by an unwavering clarity on the need for continued intense effort and by extensive efforts to engage other stakeholders in priority-setting. With experience and successive revisions to the design and practice, the Charter Restart Model has stabilized on a positive trajectory.

Selection of High-Performing Charter Management Organizations to Restart Failed Schools



DESIGN

The Charter Restart Model team devoted considerable time and resources to selecting the CMOs to operate the restart schools. The objective of the selection process was to collect and evaluate information about aspiring turnaround applicants to determine if they were appropriate to become operators of restart schools. The entire selection process required four to five months to complete.

The grant proposal to the U.S. Department of Education (USED) envisioned supporting 24 existing CMOs and three new CMO start-ups through the i3 grant. The application initially differentiated applicants into two groups: existing operators and those seeking to be one of the new CMOs. (The application eventually differentiated applicants into four categories based on the number of schools in the CMO portfolio, a proxy for their operating capacity.) All applicants submitted an initial written application with a budget and other supporting documentation. CMOs with schools in operation were required to provide evidence that their schools produced sound academic results with student populations that were similar to those in the RSD schools. The new CMO applicants were expected to open their first restarted school with the i3 grant and then build a network from there...there was no evidence base to demonstrate effectiveness. In these cases, the proposed leadership was scrutinized more closely...with heavy weight put on prior experience with successful charter schools was heavily weighted.

Each application was evaluated with a scoring rubric; rubric elements differed slightly based on whether the applicant already operated a network of schools. The application and scoring rubrics were adapted from earlier efforts to choose single-school operators. They contained multiple dimensions for evaluating the strength of applicants. For existing CMOs, prior academic results were a significant consideration, carrying 50 percent weight in the final application score. Other categories included school leader quality, professional development plans, commitment to community engagement and board of directors leadership. Thus for new CMO applicants, the other categories carried double the weight as for the applications of existing CMOs.

The historical origins of the selection materials help to explain some of their shortcomings. Specifically, both the application and the rubric touched only lightly or not at all on several key areas of CMO responsibility. There was little attention given to how authority for decisions would be divided between schools and the CMO, or how the growth of the CMO would be managed. Also missing were attention to cross-school

quality assurance, CMO-level policies and practices, community support, board strength and a range of financial management considerations.

Qualifying applicants then hosted a site visit to one of their existing schools. Based on application scores and an evaluation of the site visit, some of the applicants were invited to proceed with a full day of in-person interviews and interactions. The program on that day included a Q&A based on the aspirant's written application and site visit findings (and therefore could differ across candidates) and role-plays and scenario analyses that were common to all. A considerable amount of insight and effort went into crafting the content of each candidate's in-person program. Staff from NSNO and RSD conducted the day-long activities. Our observations showed that the interviews and interactions demanded of applicants a sophisticated understanding of school and network requirements. They also revealed quickly the areas where CMO leaders had weaknesses. The scoring rubrics for the in-person day were tied to a pre-formatted spreadsheet to tally the final score across all the documents and activities. Before any applications were received, the partners set a minimum total score for making an award.

IMPLEMENTATION

Given the critical importance that the selection process holds for the success of the Charter Restart Model, it is not surprising that it received much attention over the course of the evaluation. Clearly, to a great extent the process worked -- 25 of the 27 grants were awarded, though distributed between New Orleans and Tennessee differently than originally envisioned. In New Orleans, of the 19 grants originally planned, 13 were awarded which allowed resources to be redirected to fund 12 grants in Tennessee instead of eight. In the final phase of the program, two grants were unfulfilled. The fact that the team was able to secure more than 26 applicants and move the bulk of the winners to the point of opening in the grant window is a noteworthy outcome.

The Charter Restart Model partially fulfilled its aim of developing three new CMOs. The initial conception of "brand new schools and CMOs" was fulfilled with the launch of ReNEW and Crescent City Schools. Despite a number of applicants to be the new CMO in Tennessee, a grant was never awarded because

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the selection team was not convinced of the applicants' capacity to successfully launch their organizations. While it may seem that the implementation fell short on the seeding

of CMOs, it is important to note that the Charter Restart Model helped a number of one-school operators add schools to their portfolios and in the course of that expansion begin the formation of their CMO-level functions. In New Orleans, Collegiate Academies, New Orleans College Prep and the Choice Foundation were supported in their development. In Tennessee, Gestalt Community Schools also developed from a one-school to a multischool enterprise. In this fashion, the spirit of the commitment -- to expand the number of CMOs capable of taking on restart schools—was fulfilled even better than the original plan.

Several of the new schools delivered strong improvements in academic growth in their first year and kept a strong pace moving forward: Collegiate Academies and New Orleans College Prep were much improved over their prior schools' results and against their

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statistical controls.⁴ Still, there were aspects of the selection process that caused concern and ultimately led to inferior choices for restart operators, as evidenced by the number

of schools that either closed or posted poor results. In particular, John McDonogh High School, operated by Future is Now, returned its charter after two years of turbulence. From the analytic perspective, the interesting question is whether the selection process contributed to the observed outcomes. Our answer is in the affirmative, and as a cautionary note to other potential replications of the Charter Restart Model, explaining these vulnerabilities is less an exercise in laying blame as it is a road map to prompt future improvements.

The selection process to identify CMO turnaround operators for grants focused heavily on instructional leadership, an important school-based driver of performance. Other areas received less attention in the first two selection rounds: most notably, budget and finance plans, staffing and retention, and CMO-level operational management of turnaround activities. Additional expertise and attention were added to address some of the weaknesses in the third through fifth rounds of selection.

Beyond design differences, there were important differences across the years of the grant in the decision criteria employed in the final selection of turnaround operators. The rapid start of the project in New Orleans led to the first cohort of three restart operators being selected in a highly compressed and opaque manner. In the following two rounds, the selection team required school leader experience or CMO leader experience while in all the following rounds an applicant had to demonstrate both capacities. In other cases, the selection committee explicitly disregarded a criterion that had previously been non-

negotiable—confidence that the operator would improve the school to be within the top 25 percent of schools—and selected schools because they expected them to be “better than what we have.” Eventually, the leaders of NSNO reestablished the original high standards for selection, in part based on the evident difference in operational capacity of the restarts that were chosen under relaxed criteria.

The reporting of these events aims at illustrating two key insights about the work of school improvement. The first is that pre-established quality standards play a critical role in keeping on course, even in the face of extreme pressure to “do something” when the available options are insufficient. NSNO and RSD have the lived experience of facing that pressure. Second, the leadership of NSNO and RSD recognized the fact that they were off course in some of their selections and responded rapidly. Their responsiveness illustrates a necessary capacity to maintain focus on original goals and make adjustments to ensure progress to them.

Grant Making



DESIGN

As the fiduciary agent for the i3 grant in New Orleans, NSNO had the duty to disperse grant awards to the CMOs chosen to restart failing schools. The grants were generally \$1M, though some were as small as \$350,000. They were intended to support start-up expenses and staffing prior to school opening. The terms and responsibilities of the parties were captured in a grant award letter, including language as required by the USEd’s Investing in Innovation program. Some of the duties related to restrictions on the use of funds. Others spelled out the frequency and format of budget and performance reporting.

Each grant letter also had a customized Appendix A that articulated specific agreements between NSNO and the CMO. The requirements aimed to focus leaders on facets of the CMO operations that needed improvement if the CMO was to realize its goals. The specific terms of the appendices contained longer-term expectations, including development of strategic plans for CMO growth, adoption of stricter accounting practices, stronger board of directors membership or a number of operating practices for the new school. Both the CMO executives and NSNO program staff reported that these requirements were mutually agreed upon at the time of the award.

The project leaders realized after the first rounds of grant-making that there was one area of the grant that was inadequate: there was a disconnect between the general budgets

that CMOs submitted with their applications and the exacting fiscal practices they were obliged to observe under the grant. In addition, there was a lack of clarity as to the fiscal reports they were obliged to submit. At the start of the grant, there was a year-long period of turnovers and vacancies in the financial management of NSNO; it was during this interval that the grant letter was designed. The gaps in fiscal controls and oversight were recognized when the position of chief financial officer was filled in the summer of 2011. Among many critical upgrades to NSNO's financial controls were modifications to the grant letter and reporting schemes for grantees.

IMPLEMENTATION

At the outset of the Charter Restart Model program, the program staff viewed the grant-making process primarily as an administrative function. This viewpoint evolved in important ways over the course of the project, as the value of clear expectations and leverage with the grantees became more apparent.

Interviews with CMO leaders and NSNO project staff exposed different attitudes about the grant and its obligations. NSNO explained its orientation as being a benevolent and strategic thought partner. Several CMOs recognized and appreciated the interest, but many did not. A long-time community leader considered the grant requirements to be “cost of doing business,” as if the terms were inimical to the well-being of his organization. One CMO operator openly admitted to having a “payback mindset” and another suggested that “positive relations” with NSNO were a strategic necessity to building out the expansion plan for the CMO.

In the first years of the project, NSNO had little leverage with the CMOs after the funds were disbursed. NSNO was able to gain a degree of compliance, but leaders acknowledged that several of the early CMO grantees were “casual about their commitments,” as one executive put it. NSNO traded on goodwill, particularly with the restart operators who had prior relationships with NSNO. It also used the promise of school review visits and the prospect of future funding as incentives for CMOs to rearrange their priorities more in line with the terms of the grant letters. In the case of the worst-performing schools, its “doomsday” threat—to disassociate the school with the i3 project—actually carried little impact.

Changes occurred to make the grant letter more contractual. The shift was rooted in the relaxed attitude of some of the early grantees about their obligations and in observations of CMO and school-level performance. As NSNO gained experience with the grant and its oversight duties, the grant terms were structured differently. Some of the terms of Appendix A became prerequisites to receiving the funds. In later cohorts, some portion

of the grant was disbursed upon selection, but the remainder was tied to completion of defined implementation targets, including enrollment and operational milestones. In this way, NSNO retained a degree of leverage for a longer period.

One of the most surprising shifts in the implementation of the Charter Restart Model project was in the structure of the restart schools. NSNO allowed restart operators to reconfigure the grades of the schools they were restarting to align with the CMOs other schools. CMOs had the option to take over grade spans they had no prior experience in running: a CMO with K-8 school experience was tagged to turn around a high school. Also, some of the early grantees successfully sought permission to open a new school with only the entry grade, adding a grade in each successive year until fully built out. The Charter Restart Model proposal to USEd represented restarts as serving the rising students in the school augmented by a new cohort of students in the entry grade. In fact, the estimates of students to be served under the Charter Restart Model were based on re-enrollment of the rising students in the closing schools.

With the first cohort of i3 operators, however, NSNO altered its stance. The rationale offered by several of the CMO leaders was the need to establish a clear school culture and school routines quickly. They further argued that meeting the quality standards for restarts -- to be better than the state average by 0.2 standard deviations -- demanded an instructional focus that differed from one that focused on remediating gaps in student learning; the supply of teachers with mastery of both approaches was non-existent. NSNO explained its actions as an attempt to gain legitimacy for the restart policy by securing the participation of a strong, nationally recognized provider who made the one-grade-at-a-time school development a nonnegotiable requirement. In accepting those terms, NSNO opened the door to other CMOs requesting equivalent discretion.

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To be completely transparent, the evaluation team was sufficiently disturbed with this revelation that it sought guidance from the USEd. The grant officer for the Charter Restart Model program determined with legal counsel that under the regulations governing the USEd School Improvement Grants program, restarts could be permitted to open with a fresh set of students and grow a grade at a time.

Beyond of the benefit to incoming students, allowing restart operators to open with a phase-in approach created two negative consequences. First, this approach left all the

rising students in the closing school disenfranchised, with understandable criticism and frustration. Second, the restart operators were not exposed to the full conditions of restarting a fully enrolled school, so the ability to evaluate the success of the policy design was adversely affected by reducing the number of schools that were fully restarted.

The Impact Evaluation has tracked the academic performance of all the charter restarts in New Orleans and Tennessee. The analysis compares the average annual student gains in the restart schools with carefully developed controls. With that approach it is also possible to discern if there are differences in performance by some of the choices the operators made about their restart efforts. A full presentation of these findings appears in the 2015 Impact Analysis. To summarize briefly, the analysis showed that schools that adopted the phase-in approach had more stable and more positive impacts on student performance than those schools that followed a full turnaround. However, while the single experience of an operator electing to operate a new grade span makes it more difficult to discern definitive impacts, it appears that the approach was not as successful, though it should be noted that it is impossible to tease out the full turnaround effect from the effect of running a high school which our analysis showed to have smaller impacts overall.

Goal 2 Findings

Goal 2 represents a commitment by the i3 partners to develop and execute an integrated vision of a high-quality future education landscape.⁵ In New Orleans, that future world would be made up of i3 restarts and other existing schools, largely charter schools and CMO networks of charters. The second goal of the Charter Restart Model project aimed at creating or strengthening the conditions for schools in New Orleans to assure that students had access to quality seats. To achieve the goal, the project partners undertook a number of steps to alter the environment for schools in the community. They established their own quality standards for student and school performance that lead to elevated quality of schools over time. They defined and then produced a set of resources to support the schools in providing high-quality education options. The partners also used market-based and regulatory tools to provide a floor for assuring overall quality for all students and a particular focus on equal treatment of students.

By the end of the i3 grant, NSNO and RSD had successfully fulfilled their commitments under Goal 2. Because of the creation of the separate components described below, there exists in New Orleans today a viable mechanism for long-term school improvement for the ultimate benefit of New Orleans' students. Assuming the Goal 2 capacities remain robust into the future, success in meeting the Goal 2 commitments offsets to a degree the less-than-desired outcomes of the 13 New Orleans restart schools, since the schools will operate in an environment where adequate performance is required for continuing existence.

Quality Framework



DESIGN

In the Charter Restart Model proposal, the end state of a high-quality framework for schools was taken as the ultimate target. Understandably, the framework has to apply to all schools, not just the charter restarts; otherwise, an undesirable two-tiered system results. As one of the NSNO leaders explained, good schools regardless of origin were taken as the central building block of the system they envisioned. Working backwards, the questions of what “good schools” look like and how they demonstrate results were used to identify the key elements that foster the creation of strong schools, support their operation and hold them accountable for results. Unlike approaches to system reform

elsewhere, Goal 2 focused simultaneously in New Orleans on system and school levers.

It was through Goal 2 that the construct of the All-Charter District took root. Shortly into the project the i3 partners realized the inevitable result of restarting the remaining RSD schools would be a schema where most students would be enrolled in charter schools, most of which would be organized into networks. The schema is presented in Figure

Getting clarity and institutional buy-in about the need for the quality framework and its essential parts was extraordinarily important for the community as a whole.

4 below. That possibility presented both positive and negative hypotheticals. The arrangement might provide a degree of competitive pressure that led to school improvements. It also potentially introduced a set of

undesirable consequences such as predatory student recruitment or creaming either at the front door or at the back door of a school. Similar incentives were conceivable with respect to school staffing: it is easy to imagine some operators choosing to free-ride on the human resource investments by other operators before hiring their staffs away. As the partners built out their framework for school quality, one of the criteria thus became fostering the positive incentives and minimizing the negatives of an all-charter system.

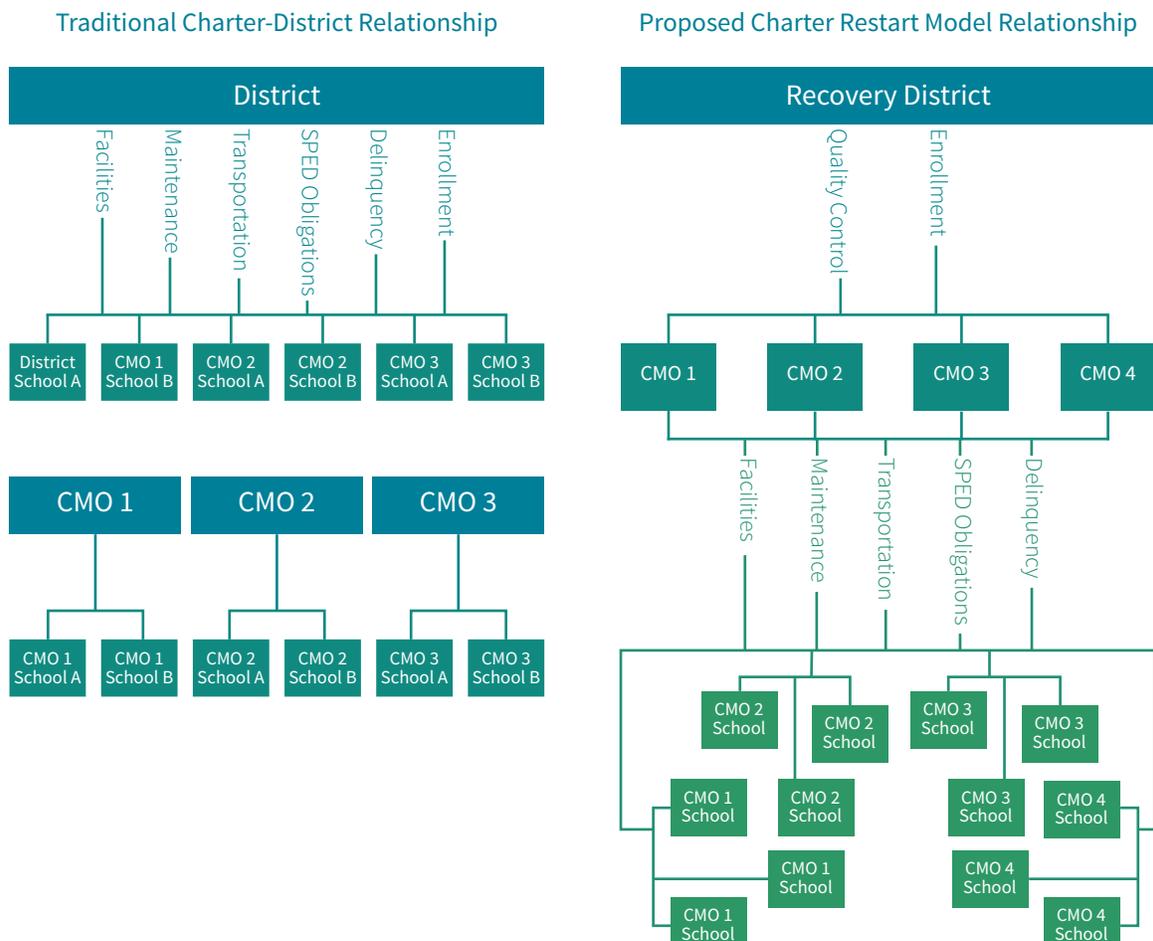
The community framework for sustaining school quality was correct to the extent that it specified the needed components of the system. It includes important drivers of quality and equality which are described in detail below. Getting clarity and institutional buy-in about the need for the quality framework and its essential parts was extraordinarily important for the community as a whole. It sets the terms and the standards going forward. One might argue about means, but there has been virtually no argument about the end results or how to recognize them. This is no small feat.

There are two shortcomings of the quality framework at the end of the i3 project, though since the continuous evolution of the framework is fundamental, future enhancement is assumed. First, many of the components of the system are yet to be fully articulated. These are components that can best be provided cooperatively at scale, such as fully integrated interim assessment systems, permanent human capital pipelines and teacher assessment systems. Given the decentralized landscape, there is also need for clear functional requirements for effective CMOs (beyond the quality standards set for schools) and for policies to assure that English language learners, transient students and dropouts have protected access to supportive educational environments. Leaders at RSD and NSNO are aware of the need for these additions and have verbally committed to them.

Second, the future success of the framework depends on maintaining a balance that CMOs and single charter schools perceive as fair and beneficial. Active participation by operators has the incentive of lower-cost access to needed services, but comes with a degree of inhibition. Under the current arrangements, the charter schools have protected operating discretion: RSD has limited influence except by persuasion and a flow of benefits for schools and students. As long as a school is meeting its performance objectives, it can't be forced into accepting policies or practices that are against its interests. If pushed, it can choose to affiliate with Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), though only one school has returned to the OPSB portfolio. To date, the balance is working. Whether this balance can be sustained indefinitely remains to be seen.

It is perhaps premature to make definitive statements on the ultimate value of the framework. Regardless, the fact that educators and citizens alike can endorse the parameters and believe the elements will improve the performance of schools represents a milestone that exists in only a small number of other communities in the United States. To a significant degree, the progress achieved with Goal 2 is one of the enduring benefits of the i3 initiative.

Figure 4: New Orleans Schema of the All-Charter District



School Supports / CMO Supports



DESIGN

In the original proposal, the elements of Goal 2 focused on helping CMOs develop their organizations. For both existing and newly developed CMOs, their need for business support to create appropriate scale and scope of operations was discussed as important to the long-run success of the Charter Restart Model. (The point applies as well to other networks.) A point of particular focus was the need to help CMO leaders move from their personal experience as school leaders into broader leadership roles by developing their planning, supervision, delegation, finance and communications skills. The idea was to take them from being former school leaders to becoming leaders of leaders.

The design recognized the vital importance of solid business skills, which were not abundant in the crop of charter leaders who opened schools in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Similar constraints were seen in their CMO teams, many of whom were elevated from one of the schools of a network to staff the network level. The rest of the details about the CMO supports, however, were not well-conceived at the start of the grant: even a simple list of the functional areas that CMO leaders needed to have under control did not exist, according to CMO leaders we interviewed. Further, even as the project leaders in NSNO recognized that strong CMO leaders would need to effectively support their schools, the extent of the need and the extent to which CMO leaders felt capable of meeting the need were not well understood. The lack of scope for this important part of the system played out during its implementation.



IMPLEMENTATION

This part of the quality framework was brought forward in the first year of the project, even though there were only three schools restarted in New Orleans. Given the largely fixed cost character of professional development, it is understandable that the services were also offered to charter operators who at that time were not part of the i3 initiative. Opening the training to others may have had important recruitment benefits -- several of the participants later applied to become restart operators.

Unfortunately, even five years after the 2005 hurricane, New Orleans had a shallow bench of providers to deliver the training and development CMO leaders desired. The solution was to secure two California-based consultants who are known for organizational development expertise. The curriculum focused on the CMO leaders' role in their organizations. The series focused a good deal on communication techniques, including supervision, performance appraisal, community engagement and conflict / problem management.

CMO leaders liked the program, but reported its primary benefit was the opportunity to share problems and solutions. It helped them less to develop a forward-looking strategy for managing performance, future growth and organizational stability. One CMO leader continued working with the coaches on a private basis, but the rest reported a return to more informal channels of communication and support. By the end of the second full year of the grant, only a few of the eight New Orleans CMOs had made clear decisions about network-wide functions -- from deciding to transfer some functions to the CMO to standardizing policies and practices or setting up clear lines of communications or operations.

Once the consulting arrangements expired, NSNO tried to internalize the development function through a series of convenings of the i3 schools. In the first Community of Practice meeting, operators from New Orleans and Tennessee were invited, after which the sessions were held separately by state. The format of the first session consisted of three case studies drawn from the common experience of the CMOs and schools. One CMO leader presented each case study and the group analyzed the case and offered potential solutions. Observations by the evaluation team recorded that engagement was high and discussion was animated and constructive. NSNO leaders reported later that they were satisfied with the session, but were disappointed that several CMO leaders had transferred the opportunity to others on their teams as development training and so the perspective of the CMO leader was lost during the session. Subsequent sessions had more formal presentations and discussions which, though well attended, were not as positively rated by the participating CMOs. Both events point to the real need for development of leadership and the thirst for such opportunities; this remains a rich opportunity for enterprise.

The importance of strong CMOs was recognized as pivotal to the success of the program. NSNO staff offered CMO reviews starting in 2011, but acknowledged in interviews that the organization lacked the foundation of experience and knowledge to provide strong leadership and guidance. In Year 3 NSNO focused more deeply on the expressed need for CMO business development. It augmented its internal capacity with contributions from two external resources, the Achievement First Charter Network Accelerator and a program called Replicating Quality Schools from the New

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York City Charter School Center. These were good decisions at the moment, as they drew upon organizations with specific expertise. This approach allowed NSNO to build its ability to provide fuller supports in the future. There is no dispute that strong academic performance of schools lies at the heart of CMO success. All the business functions of the network office are in support of schools' capacities to deliver high-quality instruction to their students. CMO performance and school performance are fundamentally intertwined. So another important area of CMOs' support naturally concerns their competence in supporting schools' efforts to effectively educate their students.

In NSNO's prior work with charter school incubation, many of the supports that it provided to schools were geared to the opening of schools. These included partnerships with Teach for America, New Leaders for New Schools, the High Bar and a number of

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others. In addition, NSNO conducted periodic school reviews, led by teams of NSNO staff and leaders from other charter schools, based on interviews with school staff and

on-site observations. The reviews were identified areas of strength and weakness in the functioning of a school.

Almost immediately upon opening the first cohort of three restart charter schools, school leaders and teachers in the two schools that took rising students voiced the view that the students being served by the new operator presented greater education deficits and emotional and behavioral issues that made instruction and general operations of the school more challenging. To address the concern, NSNO beefed up its school review protocol to provide more comprehensive reviews of schools and conducted post-review planning sessions with school leaders (and CMO leaders if requested) to develop action plans to address areas of need. The enhanced school reviews were embraced and appreciated by school leaders. The reaction of the CMO leaders was more mixed; seven CMO leaders reported the reviews as providing insight and new perspective on school performance, and the rest were either neutral or considered the reviews simply as confirmation of what they already knew. (Interestingly, there is no evident correlation between satisfaction with the school reviews and school-level improvement.)

Data System / Performance Measurement

DESIGN

The Charter Restart Model proposal included a commitment to building a data system to regularly track and report the performance of restart schools. As NSNO leaders explained, the system was intended to provide a greater degree of clarity than was available at the time from the Louisiana

Department of Education's measures of education performance. LDOE used achievement-based measures tied to proficiency on state accountability tests which are well documented as inadequate when students are performing well below

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standards. Specifically, students could make significant progress towards the desired targets and still not meet them, but the ratings would not reflect the effort.

In consultation with RSD and LDOE, NSNO pursued three related objectives. First, it diversified the range of performance measures to include metrics about student progress and continuing enrollment. With these new indicators, it was possible for NSNO to set community standards and targets for quality. On a school-level basis, the standard for performance was set at 0.2 standard deviations better than the state average; with this level of performance, New Orleans schools could be expected not only to approach the state average performance but, over time, to produce better results needed to move beyond Louisiana standards and aim for the national average. Second, NSNO secured regular reports on the performance of all the nonselective schools in New Orleans to better benchmark the performance of the i3 restarts. (Because NSNO employed no staff qualified to compute these measures at the start of the grant, CREDO agreed to prepare these measures for NSNO.) Finally, NSNO combined information gleaned from the school visits and the annual academic progress measures with information provided directly from the schools and CMOs to produce a performance dashboard for each school.

IMPLEMENTATION

This subgoal had a long development curve over the life of the Charter Restart Model program. The quantitative measures produced by CREDO were available from the first months of the project and were produced each year, though the delivery of them was

adversely affected in several years by delays in securing the required student data from the Louisiana Department of Education. The qualitative data from the school reviews were also consistently available, and over the time period the set of measures was repeatedly improved and expanded to good effect.

The separate strands of school activity and performance data offered a level of insight into the state of the New Orleans schools. The real breakthrough in the creation of the data system at NSNO came when a quantitative analyst came to work at NSNO in the third year of the grant. His skills and interests extended NSNO's capacity to analyze school data. He was also instrumental in integrating the various measures and metrics both conceptually and visually to provide a clearer picture of schools and CMO performance. His contributions over time extended into predictive analytics, which supported the exploration of a number of different school improvement scenarios. His revisions to the school dashboards were reported as exciting and very helpful by NSNO leaders. Moreover, the system is an example of real expansion of capacity at the systems level in New Orleans which holds the promise of surviving into the future.

Transparency and Accountability



DESIGN

As the Charter Restart Model implementation evolved, the transition of the New Orleans public education landscape was reshaped to be one where the operators of schools were predominantly charter school organizations. The transparency that stemmed from a regular flow of detailed data on schools stimulated community discussions about fair treatment of students across the autonomous charter organizations. Concerns

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students with various challenges such as special education students, English language learners, adjudicated or expelled youth and so on.

Solutions to these challenges were developed and adopted with remarkable speed during the five-year period. To be fair, the motivation and capacity for them are not entirely rooted in the Charter Restart Model, but the realization of the community-wide

were raised about equity of access to schools when they each managed their own admission processes. Other questions arose about the degree to which charter schools avoided serving

risks to equity stemmed directly from the activities of the i3 program.

A single point-of-entry process was developed to standardize the enrollment of students into schools. Called the OneApp, the approach centers on web-based software that permits parents to list their school preferences for each of their children (hard copy submissions are also possible). A sorting and rank-maximizing algorithm is constructed to maximize the largest number of top-ranked enrollments. RSD took the lead in providing the support for the OneApp and shortened the time to going live with the system by leveraging the work done by MIT professors for other communities. All of the schools in the RSD participate, so the full array of RSD schools is available for enrollment, constrained only by the number of available seats.

Adjustments to the OneApp were made in the second year of its operation. Students who in the spring were enrolled in a school slated for closure for whom there was no equivalent seat in the new restart were given preference in the queue and thus were more likely to get their top choices than students who were looking to change schools for other reasons.

RSD also developed and implemented a community-wide expulsion policy that requires all schools in their purview to refer potential expulsions to a community-based review. Common standards are applied so fair treatment of cases is assured. The policy is augmented with additional guidance to schools to defuse behavior problems before they escalate.

In the final year of the i3 project, NSNO applied for and received permission to allocate grant funds to support the design and implementation of a community-wide redesign of services for special education students. The new approach includes a therapeutic diagnostic and support program delivered by a local medical center for students with mental health issues. In addition, a new role of special education coordinator has been created in five charter schools, each of which has elected to become a “center of excellence” for a subgroup of students with special education needs: one program is focused on serving students on the autism spectrum, another specializes in profound intellectual challenges, etc. The coordinators have the responsibility to support classroom teachers in their schools to better serve their Special Education students.

IMPLEMENTATION

The solutions that were built over the course of the Charter Restart Model to address potential equity challenges are noteworthy for three reasons. The first is the speed and precision with which the problems were raised, assessed, judged as needing action and provided with a viable solution. The three solutions took three years from problem

identification to some solution being available to the community. In bureaucratic terms, that is light speed and speaks to the nimbleness of the institutional partners to adapt to the needs of their students.

Second, it is important to note that these solutions only worked because the school and CMO leaders collectively embraced a shared obligation to find ways to ensure equity for harder-to-place or harder-to-serve students in a manner that shared the burden fairly among operators. Whether this is evidence of positive community spirit or a response to outside pressure from the community or highly effective negotiating by RSD and NSNO is unclear, but it is easy to imagine a different operator mindset in a decentralized system such as New Orleans. The incentives to free-ride still exist and are something to watch in the future.

Finally, it is not clear an equity-enhancing solution needs to be under the aegis of the RSD. In some ways, the arrangement looks dangerously close to re-regulation, regardless of the voluntary nature of CMO participation. What is critical is that negative externalities be recognized and addressed, a role that could be fulfilled by any willing actor. In many ways it would be preferable to separate the oversight responsibilities of the RSD from the providers of equity solutions, as it would be a cleaner arrangement for all parties.

Talent Pipeline



DESIGN

Based on the experience NSNO gained as a charter school incubator, the Charter Restart Model included a component of Goal 2 that addressed the need for talent at the school and CMO levels. The extraordinary circumstances of Hurricane Katrina heightened the challenge of building sustained high-quality pipelines for teachers and administrators for charter schools in New

Orleans. As a start, NSNO leveraged its prior contracts with a range of talent providers: Teach for America,

...it became clear that the demand for talent within the Charter Restart Model required greater scale and scope.

The New Teacher Project and Building Excellent Schools, each of which agreed to offer talent recruitment support to bring new actors to New Orleans to help open schools.

Two years into the Charter Restart Model initiative, the project team revisited the original design that relied on distant providers to support talent development. While the original partner organizations had continued to support the larger community, it became clear

that the demand for talent within the Charter Restart Model required greater scale and scope. As well, early experience with the restarts in New Orleans and Tennessee illuminated a need for greater depth in building talent than the initial set of partners was able to produce. To address the need, NSNO built a new approach. It provided interim assessment programs to New Orleans charters to help leaders and teachers zero in on examples of effective instruction and instances where further support was needed. They invested in new, more comprehensive talent development organizations. They tapped MATCH and then RELAY Graduate School of Education to launch teacher and principal training programs in New Orleans and Memphis. They also partnered with the New York City Charter School Center to train CMO leaders and their senior teams in successful replication planning and strategies. As well, they brought the talents of one of the most highly regarded CMOs, Achievement First, to the community through its AF Accelerator. All of these partnerships aimed to stimulate local capacity to address talent pipeline needs in the future.

IMPLEMENTATION

Partnering with outside organizations to build talent capacity was the only available strategy in the early recovery period after Hurricane Katrina; local sources of training had not yet returned to full capacity (if they came back at all) and the need for teacher and leader talent was deep and immediate. The downside to the scheme, however, soon became apparent: partner organizations have their own missions and objectives that over time may alter the alignment with the Charter Restart Model's needs. Shifting priorities and funding dynamics caused New Leaders for New Schools to reduce its attention on New Orleans, which reduced its effectiveness. Teach for America, while maintaining an active program in New Orleans, has many other communities to support and has national growth strategies that aim to increase the number of communities it serves. While TFA continued to assign corps members to New Orleans and to Memphis, the numbers were never going to grow to be a primary source of teacher talent.

The decision to augment these partnerships was appropriate. NSNO first considered building local talent development capacity in New Orleans. Initial activity brought key barriers to light. Several members of the NSNO team have backgrounds in teacher development. These talents have been put to use through school reviews, which the schools describe as constructive and substantive. If these staff members were reassigned to building a teacher preparation program or other development program, there was no one readily available to take their place. Further, the one foray into teacher training that was pursued -- a summer workshop on math instruction -- led to the conclusion that the needs of the restart schools could not be satisfactorily met with the available level of resources. The only viable option was to pursue other partnerships with outside

organizations with specific talent development missions.

RELAY offers both an alternative certification sequence for individuals already working in charter schools and a teacher residency that builds foundational skills, supports

NSNO was also successful in securing additional support for their talent development efforts apart from the i3 funding.

transition into charter school positions with additional development, and supervision which culminates in a Master of Arts degree in Teaching. Currently, Crescent City Schools,

First Line Schools, KIPP New Orleans and New Orleans College Prep are piloting the program. Plans are to expand the program in New Orleans and Memphis, if the pilots are successful.

NSNO was also successful in securing additional support for its talent development efforts apart from the i3 funding. It won a Teacher Incentive Fund grant from the U.S. Department of Education to build educator evaluation programs to create more uniform and rigorous practices in schools and CMOs. The feedback to teachers that results from enhanced assessments and focused development is positively received by teachers. The approach also creates a more solid basis for tying student academic performance to teacher compensation. NSNO received grant support from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation to expand its school quality standards and apply them citywide to all schools, tying talent pipeline efforts to overall progress in the sector. Finally, NSNO secured a federal grant through the Charter School Program's National Leadership Awards to expand local educator capacity to serve the population of students with special education needs.

Public Awareness and Support for High-Quality Schools



DESIGN

It is important to note that in 2010, positive and constructive engagement with the community was sure to be difficult with any new education effort in New Orleans. There were multiple reasons that made this so. First, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina included policy decisions that abraded confidence and good will regarding public education. Specifically, the decision not to renew the collective bargaining agreement with Orleans Parish School District teachers when it expired in the spring of 2006 left large portions of the NOLA community feeling disenfranchised and disrespected. Any movement away from the pre-Katrina status quo would have triggered negative regard.

A set of reforms that involved a radical approach to school turnaround was viewed as an additional insult. It is little wonder, then, that the initial efforts to engage the community around the charter restart initiative encountered anger and frustration from the community.

Between 2006 and 2010 much of the reform focus was aimed at the K-8 grades. These grades are important in setting high academic standards for students and preventing deficits from taking hold. High schools in New Orleans are rougher fields to till, in part because of deeply entrenched loyalty by their alumni. Several pre-i3 grants that tried to galvanize some of the high school alumni groups to press for school improvement or conversion to charter were unsuccessful, despite the decades of poor performance.

These efforts were rebuffed as attempts to foment discontent. With this backdrop, it is not surprising that the leaders

The approach to building community support went through several iterations over the course of the i3 project.

of reform efforts, including the state superintendent and leaders at the RSD, reported that they intentionally deferred engaging with the most vociferous high school communities at the start of the Charter Restart Model grant. They planned to build stronger feeder schools to reduce the achievement gaps of students entering the high schools. They hoped to learn from their experience of restarting several rounds of schools the most successful ways to partner with the alumni groups, and they hoped the prior restarts would yield strong improvements to validate the restart approach.

The approach to building community support went through several iterations over the course of the i3 project. RSD elected to hold meetings at the schools that it announced were closing to explain the rationale and to explain the future operation of the school. RSD officials went armed with facts and figures about the school performance relative to other schools. Their approach, according to RSD officials, was intended to bring the community into understanding and agreement with the decision.

The second approach never really got off the ground -- NSNO proposed a six-month process of engagement, including the facts and figures that RSD had used but expanding the discussion with workshops to engage community members in building a vision for the future of their school. This vision was to be shared with aspiring restart operators who then could negotiate with the community to be the provider of choice. While the second approach had the benefit of genuine concern for the impact of closure decisions on the community and a sincere desire to engage in discussion about the future of the school, the approach was declined. The hostile reaction to RSD's efforts was in part because the individuals involved were recent transplants to New Orleans. Much of the personnel for

the second approach -- NSNO staff, CMO leaders, etc. -- were not from New Orleans and in the collective view of the community were not authentic representatives of the public interest. Even a team member at NSNO who was a native had a similar viewpoint.

Instead, a third variant was designed. Drawing on the existing networks of community nonprofits, RSD and NSNO sought to have some of their staff serve as facilitators for discussions with the community. The idea was to have well-respected community leaders mediate between the community and RSD. That design assumed that the sponsoring nonprofit, the Urban League of New Orleans, had a mission and strategies that aligned with the Charter Restart Model. It also assumed an adequate supply of experts. Like the second approach, this one was ultimately put aside because the timeline could not be aligned with the timetable for closures, restart operator selection and matching of operators to closing schools.

Things changed in 2012 when a respected community figure joined the RSD staff in the role of deputy superintendent of external affairs. Dana Peterson had direct experience as a member of the board of directors of a CMO that sought to constructively engage with the parents and community of a failing school in the RSD portfolio. After voluntarily withdrawing from one unsuccessful attempt the CMO was able to find more success with a second school that became one of the first i3 cohort schools. The experience persuaded Peterson that community involvement was an important element of a successful school improvement policy. He joined the RSD in order to pursue a more constructive community engagement and visioning with the communities of failing schools.

IMPLEMENTATION

Given the historical context of school takeovers and closures in New Orleans, the first-year efforts to socialize the Charter Restart Model were alarmingly clumsy. There was a noteworthy failure to understand the habits and preferences of parents and to include them in authentic ways in the re-creation of schools through the restart process. The timetable for closure decisions was opaque as were the decision criteria. Once choices were made, RSD presented its closure decisions to the school communities in a clinical manner with insufficient regard for community values and traditions. Prior communications to the parents and communities around each closing school were minimal; many staff in the early cohorts of closing schools reported that they had no prior warning that schools would be closed. School leaders in the closing schools expressed the view that RSD intentionally delayed closure announcements to avoid extended backlash. In the first year, announcements were made in the spring after the window of charter selection had closed. They were inarticulate and conflicted about the role of

the general public in selecting the new operators or matching them to closing schools. In explaining their actions, leaders of NSNO and RSD pointed to the dispersed nature of families in the aftermath of the storm, suggesting that strong school ties had been weakened. Moreover, since the landscape was more dynamic, the i3 leaders expected post-Katrina parents to embrace the open enrollment system more than in earlier years and to effectively negotiate parallel but inconsistent application processes to secure seats for their children. Understandably, despite statutory and programmatic authority, these early efforts by NSNO and RSD were viewed as top-down and suspicious.

The experience created significant friction between RSD and NSNO that lasted for several months. NSNO offered an alternate plan for community involvement with school transformations, but RSD was disinclined to adopt it. NSNO withdrew its formal efforts at that point; interviews with RSD and NSNO are inconsistent about whether RSD claimed the field as

its own by asking NSNO to withdraw. Instead, plans were developed to hire community-based facilitators managed through the Urban League, but the effort faltered when the parties could not agree to terms and resource requirements. At that time, leaders at

...public support for the restart process and for the overall direction of New Orleans public schools is increasingly positive....59 percent of respondents to a public opinion poll thought that restarting low-performing public schools with new charter management was appropriate.

RSD explained they were no longer convinced of the value of community engagement; they believed that citizens would eventually see the wisdom of the closure and restart decisions. Consequently, for almost a year, RSD and NSNO did not provide this necessary and important function.

Simultaneously, the leaders of the CMOs—especially those who were managing restarts—stepped up to take a more active role with their immediate neighborhoods. This effort extended their previous engagement activities with their parents, many of whom live outside the geography of the school. Their activities included open houses, community events and more personal interactions with the residents around their schools. By the end of the grant, all parties generally accepted that authentic engagement is a shared responsibility with different parties playing different roles during the closure, restart matching and new school rollout phases. Ultimately, the CMO and its restart school have the lengthiest engagement with the community and their commitment to building

a positive relationship is critical to ongoing support for the wider policy of school improvement in the future.

Despite the stops and starts of effort by the i3 partners concerning charter restart activities, public support for the restart process and for the overall direction of New Orleans public schools is increasingly (although not overwhelmingly) positive. In May 2015, the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives reported that 59 percent of respondents to a public opinion poll thought that restarting low-performing public schools with new charter management was appropriate. Only 20 percent opposed the approach resulting in a 3-to-1 ratio of favorability.⁶ The same proportion, 59 percent, believe that charter schools have improved education in New Orleans. Finally, 54 percent believe that efforts to improve public schools are headed in a good direction. Perhaps the single statistic for concern in the report was that less than half of the parents indicate they consider the academic quality of a school when considering schools for their children. This finding shows that there are further opportunities to engage parents and the rest of the community to be active partners in the Quality Framework.

Goal 3 Findings

An important requirement imposed on the Validation Grants by the Investing in Innovation fund was to test the replicability of the funded project in a new community. The Charter Restart Model secured the agreement of the Achievement School District (ASD) in Tennessee to serve as the replication site. At the time of the agreement, the Tennessee Department of Education had already conceived the ASD but it had not yet been authorized by the Tennessee legislature. Further, Tennessee's first-round success with the US Department of Education Race To The Top competition included a "recovery district" in the original design, so the opportunity to leverage the Charter Restart Model was an attractive option to accelerate development and garner additional resources.

The full analysis of the replication in Tennessee is presented later in this report. The analysis focuses on what was actually undertaken and the consequences that follow. For the purposes of the evaluation, however, it bears noting that the agreements between NSNO and the ASD about the replication – which elements were required and what level of modifications were permissible – did not consider the implications for creating a valid test of the original Charter Restart Model in a new environment. Leaders of both organizations expressed the view that ASD staff should privilege their own ideas about how to build a successful restart process over the needs to reconstruct the New Orleans model in Tennessee. Accordingly, the evaluation is constrained in its ability to identify the full set of conditions that would have influenced a rigorous replication effort.

Beyond the actual build-out of another version of the Charter Restart Model, NSNO from the outset also was intent on providing technical assistance to other communities that were interested in improving their public schools. This assistance primarily took the form of promoting the New Orleans approach to school reform. The post-Katrina reorganization of the RSD and the plan to have failing public schools re-energized by high-performing charter management operators were bold and unconventional instruments that the project team wanted to introduce to other communities. To accomplish this objective, NSNO employed written and digital communications and pursued both responsive and proactive strategies.

Creation of Dissemination Resources

DESIGN

The NSNO team relied on a written report to capture and present the New Orleans education reform approach. With the assistance of Public Impact, a research and policy consultancy, NSNO issued a report, “New Orleans-Style Education Reform: A Guide for

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Cities” to introduce the legislative and regulatory foundations of New Orleans’ public education landscape.⁷ Published in 2012, the guide focused on three key strategies: 1) strong

governance and accountability, 2) building educator recruitment and development pipelines to fuel the growth of schools and 3) incubating new schools and growing proven schools into networks.

There were other digital communications developed over the life of the grant. On the NSNO web page, a number of blogs were posted starting in 2012 addressing issues of NOLA-wide interest. Gradually, the topics drifted to focus on the charter restart activities, with some attempt at engaging community discussion about what New Orleans schools needed to provide to adequately prepare their students for the future.

In late 2013, the then-CEO of NSNO began blogging. His initial posts were published as guest author on reform-oriented publications and promoted by NSNO as part of their communication strategy. Ultimately, the CEO launched his own highly successful blog as he departed the organization. Though it was legally separate from the NSNO website, there was general knowledge that the author was the former CEO of NSNO. The focus of that set of commentaries was grounded in the work of the restart project, but was almost entirely geared to advocating for all-charter districts.

IMPLEMENTATION

The guide received wide distribution and review; casual conversation with education leaders in seven cities revealed they were aware of the report and its basic recommendations. The guide was a good introduction to the systems-level levers of supply and demand as well as the legislative and regulatory preconditions for the Charter Restart Model. As a vehicle for explaining the Charter Restart Model, the guide was less successful. Even before any performance data were available from the first cohort of restart charters, NSNO pushed for the creation of this report. This decision created a

degree of skepticism among a number of the education leaders mentioned above.

In 2015 as the Charter Restart Model grant was in its final year, NSNO again partnered with Public Impact to produce a second report supported by grant funds.⁸ The second report leveraged the 10-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina to assess the progress that occurred in New Orleans over the decade. The closure and restart experience was discussed in the report, but it served a minor role in a larger narrative of developing the all-charter district and its associated commitments to strong support and success for every student.

Provide Technical Assistance to other Communities Seeking to Improve their Public Education Sectors

DESIGN

Once the US Department of Education announced it would award a Validation Grant to NSNO and RSD for the Charter Restart Model, educators around the country were interested in learning more about the design and its utility as a reform strategy. These inquiries were handled initially on an ad hoc basis by one member of the NSNO leadership team. As he described the work, a considerable amount of the technical assistance involved simply explaining the Charter Restart Model in varying degrees of depth. Once the “New Orleans-Style Education Reform: A Guide for Cities” was published, NSNO was able to focus its involvement in two ways. First, because there was a ready resource for entry-level inquiries, NSNO was able to be more selective in the cases with which it would engage. Second, because the preliminary level of engagement was handled with the report, the content of the technical assistance evolved to be more strategic and policy oriented, helping other communities understand the nuances of the recovery district and advising on ways to create the necessary support for adoption in other states.

A parallel opportunity for dissemination of the Charter Restart Model developed over the course of the i3 grant that provided NSNO broad exposure to other cities that had organizations interested in fostering strong reform in their schools. In 2010 The Mind Trust, an Indianapolis-based school incubator and advocate for reform, invited several other like-minded organizations from around the country to join a new network aimed at sharing strategies and supporting a broad-scale effort in each community to stimulate improvement in the education sector. The network, originally called the Cities for Educational Entrepreneurship (CEE) Trust and now known as Education Cities, invited NSNO to join in 2012. Education Cities meets three times a year; NSNO quickly

emerged as a strong contributor. This partnership has offered a variety of supports to other communities, including legislative and regulatory guidance, school selection, CMO and leadership development and system-wide advocacy. One community in particular received a substantial amount of support both on site and through consultative visits to New Orleans, accelerating the capacity to adopt a similar restart model in that community.



IMPLEMENTATION

The experience of NSNO with technical assistance and dissemination of its work provides an exemplary illustration of the need for careful decisions about the dissemination strategy in an organization aiming to enable other organizations to take on new activities. It is important to be extremely clear about the desired outcome. It is also required that one appropriately value the costs and benefits of possible tactics and match them to specific targets. In NSNO's case, the implementation of the technical assistance work evolved as the leaders gained greater clarity about their intentions and opportunities. The early phase of telephone-based consultancy (which consisted primarily of explaining the model over and over again) was low impact but high cost in terms of staff time. This was especially true for NSNO because the individual responsible for most of the technical assistance transitioned to become the CEO but still maintained the technical assistance role.

Subsequently, that CEO spent significant portions of two years traveling and lecturing about the Charter Restart Model. While that effort expanded the exposure of the Charter Restart Model and the All-Charter District, the trade-off of executive functions against external communications with uncertain impacts was routinely made in favor of public speaking. These efforts were augmented with time spent writing about the design. The CEO freely acknowledges that the experience led him to discover a passion and calling for sharing his ideas about education reform, and he transitioned in 2014 to pursuing that work independently.

The most productive avenue for effective technical assistance occurred via the work with the CEE Trust / Education Cities. The value of NSNO sharing experience with 20-plus other organizations seeking to effect similar impacts in their communities has been high. In many ways NSNO, along with the Mind Trust and the Skillman Foundation, provided the exemplars for a new entity in the public education landscape -- the "harbormaster." First defined in 2013 in a Fordham Foundation blog post, the harbormaster function provides planning, coordination and advocacy for education improvements in the communities they serve.^{9,10} The solid foundation in systems improvement that NSNO gained as a result

of the Charter Restart Model helps NSNO take an independent role in New Orleans, and in so doing provides an important role model for other communities to emulate.

Replicating the Charter Restart Model in Tennessee

Part of the charge to the evaluation team was to ascertain how well NSNO and RSD fulfilled their i3 Validation Grant requirement to replicate the Charter Restart Model in a new location, an important test of the scalability of the model. The proposal to the U.S. Department of Education included an agreement to use the Achievement School District in Tennessee as the replication site. In the original Validation Grant proposal, the Tennessee Achievement School District was identified as the replication partner for the activities listed in Goals 1 and 2:

Goal 1: Build capacity to incubate and expand charter restart operators

- Enable charter operators to launch new schools by augmenting their central infrastructure for executing school turnarounds and providing incubation support leading up to school launch
- Incubate one new charter restart operator in Tennessee via a process established by NSNO

Goal 2: Provide infrastructure to sustain charter restart schools

- Collect and analyze school performance data to identify failing schools and monitor turnarounds
- Build community support (among parents, teachers and community members) and facilitate the takeover process through community liaisons
- Conduct twice-annual reviews of turnaround schools to monitor quality and performance outcomes
- Increase parents' awareness of school performance data to support them in making well-informed school choices
- Convene the turnaround community to collectively problem-solve and share best practices

The proposal to the U.S. Department of Education for the Charter Restart Model Validation Grant listed the ASD to be the provider of all of the program components described above under both Goal #1 and Goal #2. However, the filing of the i3 Validation

Grant proposal preceded the start-up of the ASD, so there could have been fuzziness regarding the specific commitments made on behalf of the ASD. As described below, while the model that was built in Tennessee has most of the features of the Charter Restart Model described above, environmental conditions in Tennessee and ASD bandwidth limitations meant that several features received minimal or uneven attention over the course of the grant.

To address this portion of the Organizational Capacity study, it is necessary to understand two things. First, what did “replication” mean to the parties? This requirement is important in practical ways, because it helps distinguish mandatory and discretionary design -- the “adopt” vs. adapt” balance -- when assessing the fidelity of the replication to the shared understanding. Second, did the array of program components that was implemented in Tennessee create an equivalent environment for school improvement in Tennessee as was created in New Orleans? Even if ASD were permitted and chose to adapt the design, the resulting elements still must achieve the same degree of interaction and influence as the original model.

What parts of the Charter Restart Model was ASD expected to adopt?

From NSNO’s perspective, there were nonnegotiable elements of the Charter Restart Model that ASD had to adopt. These included a rigorous selection process to choose high-performing charter management organizations to take over failing schools, articulation of a quality threshold to assess all the restart schools (though no

From NSNO’s perspective, there were nonnegotiable elements of the Charter Restart Model that they believed ASD had to adopt.

specific value was imposed by NSNO or RSD), and a high level of transparency about the effort and results of the replication. The project leaders at NSNO specifically mentioned their intention to give ASD considerable discretion in the remaining components of the Charter Restart Model. We can infer that complete fidelity to the original design was not a priority for NSNO.

From ASD’s side of things, in initially describing their understanding of the parameters for replication, senior ASD leaders did not name the entire list of program elements. Under Goal #1, they expected to select restart operators with strong records of prior success through a rigorous selection process. They expected to award start-up funds to those selected. They did not report any intention of providing incubation support prior to the new schools opening.

The list of required program elements that ASD considered integral to the Charter Restart Model also included most of the components of a permanent infrastructure to support ongoing quality improvement efforts (i.e., Goal #2 components). These included community engagement with parents, teachers and community members, parent education, and building communities of practice. The list from ASD also included an array of support services to the restart schools.

Understanding the version of the Charter Restart Model that emerged in Tennessee requires a review of history and context. At the time the proposal was delivered, the Tennessee Charter School Incubator (TCSI) was in its first year of operation, launched with state and national philanthropy and a portion of the Tennessee Race to the Top award for the purpose of incubating 20 charter schools in Memphis and Nashville. TCSI was a logical choice to provide supports to the new charter restarts, though it was not a named party in the i3 Validation Grant proposal. By the time the ASD was itself fully launched, the TCSI had entered into partnerships in 2012 with Building Excellent Schools in Boston and the Education Entrepreneur in Indianapolis to train and support aspiring charter school leaders. Those programs focused on new charter schools and restarts respectively from design through school opening. Those arrangements secured, TCSI turned its direct focus to communications and advocacy on behalf of charter schools in Tennessee. In 2013, the Incubator merged with the Tennessee Charter Schools Association to become the Tennessee Charter School Center with the aim of providing the full range of incubator and school support services by late 2014. This history is important as it illuminates that for much of the grant period, the cultivation and support of charter schools that New Schools for New Orleans delivers in New Orleans were not locally available in Tennessee.

As reported in interviews, in reaction to the shifts at TCSI, ASD leaders made only sporadic efforts to identify areas of operational concern to the turnaround schools, provide either problem-solving thought-partnership or direct solutions. Only one CMO reported that ASD was the primary support for problems it encountered.

Later in the project, ASD leaders retreated altogether from helping schools find solutions to their challenges and concentrated on

As reported by school and CMO leaders, the model as adopted in Tennessee is hierarchical in contrast to the collaborative approach used in New Orleans.

authorizing and accountability. Ultimately, ASD leaders came to believe that involvement in quality improvement efforts with schools was a conflict for the ASD model they eventually created, a view that was supported in later interview responses of the NSNO leadership.

By the end of the grant, ASD has partially adopted most of the elements of the Charter Restart Model. It has identified schools for turnaround and selected charter school operators to assume those duties; instead of the original eight grants, ASD was able to award 12 grants. The objective to start a new CMO was not fulfilled because of concerns about operator capacity. The objectives related to building a permanent infrastructure have been addressed; however the focus of the work has focused more on monitoring and reporting on performance and less on supporting the school operators operationally or advocating for them. As reported by school and CMO leaders, the model as adopted in Tennessee is hierarchical in contrast to the collaborative approach used in New Orleans.

Formative assessments of quality through deep on-site school reviews provide operators independent assessment of their school quality, but the CMOs are then expected to craft modifications to their school designs and marshal needed supports in a landscape that is largely devoid of resources.

By the end of the grant period, ASD leaders conceived of their role as analogous to the RSD, stressing their responsibilities as compliance monitors and authorizer. The difference in conception of the model has other roots as well. ASD leaders defined their objective as taking the “bottom 5 percent” schools they worked with to the top 25 percent

The result is that “the model” in Tennessee focuses primarily on transitioning failing schools and relies on other policy levers such as oversight via charter school authorizing to create the on-going conditions for quality and school improvement.

– a goal that exceeds normal gains several times over. ASD leaders reported from the first evaluation interviews that, like the New Orleans CMOs, they viewed the i3 project largely as a funding source to pursue their own approach to school improvement. One leader suggested that the

degree of overlap between i3 and the ASD strategic plan was at best 75 percent. To the extent that turning around failing schools was integral to both i3 and the ASD mandate, the arrangement suited the parties well.

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Institutional Arrangements

DESIGN

The Achievement School District (ASD) was conceived as part of Tennessee’s application to the U.S. Department of Education for the Race to the Top (RTT) competition. Kevin Huffman, the secretary of education of Tennessee at the time, led a successful RTT effort and secured \$500 million for the state. A portion was earmarked to support the ASD operations. Once the Validation Grant for the Charter Restart Model was awarded, pressure to make the ASD operational mounted. The Tennessee Department of Education searched for six months to hire its first ASD superintendent, choosing Chris Barbic, the founder and CEO of the successful Texas charter management organization, YES Prep. It took about the same amount of time to successfully bring enabling legislation through the Tennessee state legislature, so ASD launched in late 2011 and, like the i3 program in NOLA, had to scramble to get the first cohort of restarts lined up for fall 2012 openings.

The design and function of the ASD differed from the arrangements in NOLA. ASD provided the governmental function of authorizer to the CMOs that received charters for turnaround work. It acted as funder and distributor of i3 funding to turnaround operators (though all choices needed NSNO clearance and grant-making). It also served the role of liaison and coach supporting the opening of the turnaround schools. Initially, ASD provided support for interactions with the community, additional student recruitment and first-year school operations. Subsequent staff turnover and ASD re-organization moved the ASD away from school and CMO supports but created several other facets of the Charter Restart Model’s permanent infrastructure.

Replicating the New Orleans Charter Restart Model included a multi-year relationship with New Schools for New Orleans and the Recovery School District to understand, adopt and adapt the program elements of the model to Tennessee. The original grant proposal included staffing for a full-time NSNO staff person to support the replication efforts, as well as the transfer of protocols and procedures developed in Louisiana for CMO recruitment, operator selection and convening of operators to share practices and solve problems.

IMPLEMENTATION

The idea of the ASD in Tennessee garnered widespread support from the governor, the Tennessee state legislature and many business leaders. It was less warmly embraced by the existing education system, even though the record of achievement in urban districts had been universally acknowledged as troubled for decades. Traditional district leaders considered the timing of the ASD’s creation unfortunate, as they were eagerly looking to

the Race to the Top grant for more resources for their systems.

The coincidence in timing created problems from a practical perspective, despite strong policy leader support. The overwhelming task of rolling out the RTT-funded initiatives took up virtually all the

bandwidth of the Tennessee Department of Education (TN-DOE). ASD faced challenges getting attention and committed resources from TN-DOE, which created delays in necessary approvals

Traditional district leaders considered the timing of the ASD's creation unfortunate, as they were eagerly looking to the Race To The Top grant for more resources for their systems.

and lack of support from other DOE departments. As one staff member explained, gaining mindshare to address critical decision points was difficult in the start-up phase of the ASD.

From the vantage of the CMOs and their start-up schools, there were several advantages to the structure, function and institutional home of the ASD. Consolidation of so many functions was efficient and convenient for school operators. It eliminated some of the coordination and turf challenges that appeared in NOLA. One key area where this advantage was evident, and mentioned by every CMO, was in the pre-opening reviews and certifications.

But the location of the ASD within the Department of Education also proved challenging in important ways. Being part of the Department of Education required more protracted and complex processes for routine requests such as travel reimbursement and personnel management than was found in Louisiana. The start-up activities of the ASD were slowed by the procedures of the TDOE as a result, according to the ASD team.

To its credit, the management team of the ASD took every feasible step to work around the bureaucratic impediments. Some of these challenges were met by using philanthropic match funds to set up independent supports; for example, when the IT department showed no sense of urgency to set up emails and web resources so that the ASD could use them at the start of its public activities, ASD solved the problem by setting up autonomous channels for email and web sites. As another example, when ASD was rebuffed by the finance department of the TDOE in its request to provide modified charts of account for charter school reporting, the problem was solved internally at ASD by having a staff person do the transformations of CMO reports to the format that the state would accept. Finally, the i3 grant to the ASD included aid for start-up costs for the CMOs selected to turn around the schools ASD identified for transformation. The grants

were administered through NSNO and so avoided many of the complexities of the TDOE contracts system.

Over the course of the partnership between the ASD and the Charter Restart Project, there was a growing recognition that the ASD faced the same challenges that had beset the RSD in its early years; namely, too many functional roles with inadequate levels of funding

The primary responsibility for the Charter Restart replication was assigned to one ASD staff member, with support from others on the ASD team. There was no turnover in the primary position, which ensured continuity and institutional memory.

to support all of them. In the case of the ASD, they embodied all the functions of the original RSD -- including serving as district office to all the schools that were direct-run as well as being the authorizer, restart operator selector, and support to charter turnaround operators

as they launched their schools. The challenges were exacerbated by the distance between the ASD offices in Nashville and the city of Memphis, where the bulk of the ASD's work was located. ASD also was expected to become fully operational in all areas post haste, an even greater challenge than the marginal adaptation required by the Charter Restart Model at the RSD.

ASD staff members were candid about being over-extended in the first two years. The choice to relocate staff to Memphis eased the load. These conditions also were part of the motivation to "spin off" the direct-run schools in Memphis into a stand-alone network that faces the same kinds of accountability as do the charter schools. (The divestiture was not a part of the Charter Restart Model agreement, but is evidence that changes in the structure of the ASD were developed to manage the load of responsibilities.)

The primary responsibility for the Charter Restart replication was assigned to one ASD staff member, with support from others on the ASD team. There was no turnover in the primary position, which ensured continuity and institutional memory. Moreover, the individual had prior experience in New Orleans and brought to the position personal relationships with many of the people in NSNO and RSD who worked on the Charter Restart Model. These informal connections facilitated the sharing of information and support of ASD's efforts. The assignment of the full-time NSNO staff person did not occur, though it is unclear if that outcome reflects an unfulfilled request or a decision that the blend of informal and intermittent formal support was sufficient. As a partial offset, several NSNO team members spent time in Tennessee during selection rounds while others supported the activities of the ASD remotely.

The multiple structural and functional constraints that ASD faced and continues to address were recognized by several of the CMO leaders in their interviews. On balance, their comments identified two implications of ASD's structure and alignment with the Department of Education. First, CMO leaders and school leaders spoke repeatedly of unfulfilled

...the many hats worn by ASD created confused communication and interaction with the CMO and school leaders, several of whom became wary of being candid about problems.

requests for guidance and support. There simply was not sufficient bandwidth at ASD to respond quickly and fully. The second implication is more serious: the many hats worn by ASD created confused communication and interaction with the CMO and school leaders, several of whom became wary of being candid about problems. What one might say to someone who influences funding might not be prudent to share with a finance monitor; what one might share with a policy advocate might be best kept unknown by an authorizer. No amount of trust and goodwill can overcome the lack of structural safeguards. The result is a distance between CMOs and the organization that can both help and hurt them.

Goal #1 Activities: Selection of Failing Schools to Close



DESIGN

While ASD holds the same authority to unilaterally assume control of failing schools in Tennessee as the RSD has in Louisiana, ASD Superintendent Barbic elected to follow a different approach. He preferred to partner with the superintendents of districts to select schools that might be chosen for takeover and to work cooperatively to effect a smooth transition. The rationale was based in part on the fact that Memphis had far many more failing schools than the ASD could effectively address, so a collaborative strategy set conditions for a long-term strategy. In addition, Barbic sought to minimize the community blowback that he witnessed in New Orleans, especially in light of the Memphis practice of zoned student enrollment. Because most students attend their local school, conflicts would likely have had longer lifespans and made the job of the new school operator that much more difficult. As Barbic figuratively explained, "I took my six-shooter to meet the superintendent, but I just laid it on the table and didn't mention it."



IMPLEMENTATION

Perhaps because the prospect of consolidation with Shelby County Schools was already

being discussed, the Memphis superintendent was agreeable to the joint-powers approach. It also bears mention that the Memphis superintendent had plans of his own to establish an Innovation Zone, which protected other low-performing schools from transfer to the ASD. As such, a tactic of downplaying ASD's authority served his interests well. The Nashville superintendent was less enthusiastic in the first year and managed to minimize Barbic's invitation, leaving his low-performing Nashville public schools to founder for additional time. In both cases, the decision to pursue joint selection of schools benefited all the parties while establishing the necessary legitimacy of the ASD without unnecessary friction. Ultimately, the future success of this arrangement will be influenced far more by the availability of funding to support charter restart operators taking over schools than by the distribution of authority and discretion between the districts and the ASD.

Recruitment of Restart Operators

DESIGN

Because the existing base of charter operators in Tennessee is small, neither Memphis nor Nashville had a deep bench of CMOs for recruiting charter restart operators (and as discussed below, several

...it was clear from the outset that the general approach to recruitment in Tennessee would differ from that of New Orleans. It was incumbent on the ASD to look outside Tennessee for potential recruits.

existing CMOs could not meet the minimum quality requirement to apply). Accordingly, it was clear from the outset that the general approach to recruitment in Tennessee would differ from that of New Orleans. It was incumbent on the ASD to look outside Tennessee for potential recruits.

The outstanding record of performance of YES Prep in Texas under Chris Barbic's leadership brought him in close and regular contact with other strong CMOs across the country. These contacts served him well in his new position as ASD executive. He leveraged his network extensively as the ASD tried to build a set of applicants for restart charters. The motivation was to attract top national CMOs who were considering geographic diversification as part of their growth strategy.

The overture to high-performing CMOs in other parts of the country was not unique; over the course of the i3 grant, the same strategy was embraced by other urban communities,

and will continue into the future. The CMOs with the highest success or profile receive dozens of invitations to expand into new regions. The success in recruiting CMO leaders from other parts of the country was influenced to a great extent by a unique opportunity that ASD was able to offer them. Prospective charter restart operators were permitted to request permission for several charter schools in their initial application -- this gave operators assurance that they could create a local network without needing individual charters at each point of expansion.

IMPLEMENTATION

The first cohort was recruited under severe time pressure -- once all the legal, regulatory and administrative hurdles were cleared, the ASD had the same truncated timetable to recruit, select and assign schools to charter restart CMOs as occurred in New Orleans. Thus, the first CMOs were local operators who were willing to take over failing schools in the Frayser neighborhood of Memphis or expand their small CMO in Nashville. The recruitment process in the first round was narrowly cast; in later rounds ASD made efforts to expand notice of the opportunity to as many CMOs as possible in order to garner a deeper field of candidates.

In the second year, ASD's national recruitment strategy paid off and it scooped New Orleans and several other contending cities by securing the commitment of Aspire Charter Schools to apply. Aspire was a top-ranked California CMO with 10 academically strong schools at the time, though none had been a restart. It was generally recognized for an exemplary professional development program for teachers and leaders. Reducing the costs and uncertainty of future charter applications meant that Aspire could establish a regional network of schools at affordable scale. Existing CMOs were frustrated at the news that a new provider was offered terms they had not been shown. The local CMOs also expressed the concern that the Memphis landscape -- admittedly not highly contested -- would see rapid expansion by a strong competitor.

The remaining recruits were a combination of local and national providers. From observations of the selection interviews for the 2014 opening schools, applicants were loosely screened for their prior academic results. If the ASD continues to use the restart approach to school improvement, the process could be made more efficient with tighter controls at the recruitment stage.

Selection of Restart Operators

DESIGN

By mutual agreement, the ASD planned to adopt the application and interview design created by New Schools for New Orleans. The design of the selection process was described earlier in this report. Technical and staffing support from NSNO supplemented ASD personnel and aimed for fidelity of this critical component of the Charter Restart Model to Tennessee.

IMPLEMENTATION

The ASD conducted four rounds of selection during the grant period. As mentioned earlier, the first round was executed almost immediately upon ASD start-up in order to give the chosen operators the longest possible runway before school opening in the fall of 2012. All the applicants in the first round received awards. All were permitted to open their i3 schools with a phase-in approach. As with the initial and compressed selection round in New Orleans, the four awardees in the first cohort described the selection process as mostly pro forma. The first round was supported with several members of the NSNO team.

The procedures became more structured beginning with the second selection round. They also were conducted on larger pools of applicants, making the process more selective. NSNO continued to serve in an advisory and support role in the remaining rounds. The ASD team drew on knowledgeable individuals from within the TN-DOE as additional supplements to its ranks, and was able to schedule the rounds of interviews in succession. The arrangement facilitated comparison across entities in the same applicant cohort. The selected operators presented a mix of phase-in and full turn-around proposals.

The evaluation team observed the third selection round consisting of four applicants, for which one grant was available. Based on the content of the questions asked of applicants, it was apparent that the organizational capacities of the applicants differed widely. Each application had one or more significant gaps in its proposal, such as staffing, leadership capacity, board strength, budget savvy or instructional leadership. These gaps made the applicants less ready to embark on the challenging work of restarting schools in Tennessee. Further, a number of the elements in the applications were contingent on securing the i3 grant. For example, one proposal had a commitment to begin critical personnel searches only if the grant were in hand. Another suggested a process for staff planning instead of presenting a fully developed plan. Compared to the applicants that reached the interview stage in New Orleans, the Tennessee cohort of

applicants in the observed round had fewer existing organizational strengths from which to support their restart efforts and presented greater risks that they could successfully address the gaps in their proposals in time for the opening of schools.

The selection question and answer, interview and role-play protocols were handled in a consistent manner across all applicants. The selection team correctly identified each of the applicants' proposal shortcomings and offered applicants the chance to describe how they intended to address the gap.

The selection team faced the same tradeoff in the round that was observed in New Orleans: while it was clear that one or two of the applicants were too far off the mark to receive an i3 grant, the remaining applicants had notable drawbacks. ASD was in

...distant CMOs need to show a cogent plan for delivering supports to the schools.

a similar position to the New Orleans selection team: they had to decide whether to make any grant at all or provide one with significant conditions placed on

the applicant. The challenge was both operational and political; the applicant might or might not be able to meet the conditions, but the proof would not be available until after the award was publicly announced and the match with the school it would restart already underway.

The selection process in Tennessee included a new aspect that has strong implications for scaling the Charter Restart Model to other parts of the country. As previously discussed, the ASD successfully recruited CMOs from outside Tennessee to apply for support to restart failing schools in the state. The benefits of bringing experienced operators to improve schools also have a set of challenges that were revealed during the selection process. In addition to replicating the CMO's school model (or adapting it to fit local conditions), distant CMOs need to show a cogent plan for delivering supports to the schools. A local network of several operating schools could support a local CMO office, but the path to that arrangement while adding schools incrementally was far from clear. The challenges of long-distance support are easy to imagine. Alternatively, building a local office required planning in parallel to school start-up, coordination with the home office and a set of resources that far exceeded the amount of the i3 grant. It was also not clear that the timing of the i3 grants and school start-up allowed the necessary runway for the necessary build-out of CMO-level functions in whatever form they took.

Supporting New Operators from Incubation to School Opening



DESIGN

The proposal to the U.S. Department of Education indicated that, among other Goal 1 responsibilities, the ASD would provide incubation support leading up to school launches. This function evolved over the grant period from informal guidance and liaison with restart operators to a more formal New Operator Induction. The first cohort of restart schools was undertaken on a rapid timeline by CMOs with Tennessee experience. Their shortened runway to opening coincided with the ASD also building a range of systems to manage its direct-run schools and develop a positive presence in the communities where the restarts were to occur, so there was no apparent bandwidth to create a program and uncertain demand for it. The second cohort presented a different mix of need and expectation. CMOs who were new to Tennessee were in greater need of support. ASD had the experience of the first cohort to draw upon and a sufficient number of providers to make the development of an on-boarding program worthwhile.

There were two on-boarding sessions for the 2014 and 2015 opening schools. Starting a year prior to opening, ASD convened the new operators to tour the early restart schools and begin to plan for the major challenges involved with opening a restart school. In January, prior to opening, a second conference focused more directly on the start-up plans of the new operators, rating their plans and delving into targeted revisions where needed.



IMPLEMENTATION

The new operators who attended the on-boarded sessions reported that the information they gained was helpful. The chance to meet other operators and learn from prior experience was also valued. The drawbacks to the approach were mentioned by four of the providers; namely, that the suggested solutions for known pitfalls, especially staffing and operations, were already known and had already been considered. The operators had expected either more customized support for their situation or more resources so they could bring a calibrated solution to address their needs.

Goal #2 Activities: Community Engagement



DESIGN

As mentioned above, Memphis is a district of zoned enrollment. The Frayser neighborhood, like others throughout Memphis, had long relationships with its schools,

however poor their performance. Communication and inclusion were perhaps even more important in Memphis than in New Orleans. Throughout the grant period, ASD emphasized its commitment to transparency and active interaction with the community as a vital part of building momentum for school improvement. The ASD identified a number of efforts to form an active presence in the community: meeting with parents, providing information about the restart design and schedule for transformation and seeking connection with the local influencers and leaders.

ASD created Community Advisory Panels in Memphis to involve community members in the matching of restart operators to schools. ASD staff explained that the purpose of the Community Panels was two-fold. Since most of the ASD team was new to Tennessee and based in Nashville, ASD recognized their dearth of local history, context and neighborhood relationships; it was hoped that the panel members would share theirs. The panel also aimed to leverage panel members' networks in communicating the ultimate decisions about school matching, both to expand the community's exposure to the transition and to elevate the legitimacy of the work via affiliation with respected members of the community.

For its part, ASD staff members introduced new CMO and school leaders once the matching of CMOs and schools was completed. They prepared written materials that were distributed at meetings and at local community gathering places. They sponsored a number of community events around the opening of schools to build school spirit and launch the new schools positively.

In the summer of 2015, the ASD revised its community engagement strategy to create Neighborhood Advisory Councils to replace the Community Advisory Panel. The revision moves the locus of community engagement closer to the communities that will be most affected by school transformations. Members of the Neighborhood Advisory Councils will be followed during the evaluation extension to gauge their function and impacts.

IMPLEMENTATION

As might be expected in any case where a neighborhood school faces transition, the parents and residents of Frayser greeted the news of school closure with distrust and discomfort. In the minds of the residents, why was “their school” allowed to languish for so long and then be the first selected for a new and largely untested transition? The fact that ASD had based its decisions on a commitment to transition a full set of elementary, middle and high schools so that the entire K-12 experience was improved for the children of the neighborhood mitigated the reaction to a degree.

ASD staff members spent time in the Frayser community in the early months of

operations, paid frequent visits to parents and other groups, and extended themselves with extensive sharing of contact information. Once the new schools opened, ASD tried to keep up an active communication strategy with the neighborhood, primarily through contact with parents. Staffing constraints played a part in the level of contact that was maintained, as ASD staffers turned to new cohorts of schools in their pre-opening and opening phases.

In forming the Community Advisory Panels, ASD leaders told the evaluation team they were extremely careful about the selection of members for the first panel, seeking people who would be “good ambassadors” for the ASD plan. They were candid about wanting endorsement of their choices rather than the expression of different preferences. A few school leaders reported that serving on the Community Advisory Panels was viewed with skepticism by some members of the community who felt that the chosen individuals were not true representatives of the residents. In any event, the duration of the panels was short, and the panels were not maintained as part of the ongoing vehicles of community communications.

Barbic admitted in the third year of the grant that he had been remiss in failing to build a stronger base of support in the neighborhood and the larger community of influence, including churches, business leaders, local elected officials and community leaders. He had begun to make new efforts in that direction at the time of his heart attack. Instead, Memphis school staff took up the responsibility of building strong relations with parents and the community, much as was observed in New Orleans. School leaders maintain a physical presence during student drop-off and pick-up, they organize home visits by teachers and they annually canvass the immediate neighbors to update them on the news of the school.

Creation of a School Quality Framework



DESIGN

Part of the commitment to replicate the New Orleans Charter Restart Model in Tennessee involved the creation and use of a data system to measure, track and report the performance of the schools that participated in restart activities. The choice of measures and metrics that comprise the data system was colored by ASD’s dual roles as authorizer of the restart charter schools and as directors and coaches of the former Memphis Public Schools that ASD took into its portfolio and ran directly. (The direct-run schools are not part of the Charter Restart Project in Tennessee.)

ASD leaders describe their School Performance Framework as follows: “The purpose of the ASD SPF is to establish clear performance expectations and timelines for school action decisions for all schools in the ASD portfolio, direct-run and charter operated.”¹¹ Throughout the School Performance Framework website, the framework is described as an accountability tool. The framework scores influence operators’ continuation or replication based on a critical decision point at the start of the third year of operations. An additional requirement is placed on multi-school operators: every school in their current portfolio must be on track to be in the top 25 percent in order to have replication plans green-lighted.

The School Performance Framework consists of three groups of indicators: a set of financial and operational metrics, another measuring the status and growth of student academic performance, and a third focused on school culture. The academic performance metrics are especially important as they tie directly to the overall mission of the ASD; namely, to move schools from the lowest five percent of the distribution to the top 25 percent. The framework includes a School Success Rate that is a composite of proficiency rates (and for high schools the graduation rate) compared to other schools in Tennessee. Two growth metrics are included. The first is benchmarked academic progress of tested students in each school using the levels of the Tennessee Value-Added Analysis Score (TVAAS). The second growth metric assesses the yearly progress of students against a national benchmark based on the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) interim assessment test, the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). The performance of each school is judged against a rubric that sets annual targets depending on the grade span of the school. Each component -- for example, progress as measured by the MAP test -- has four categories of performance: does not meet minimum expectations, approaching expectations, meets expectations and exceeds expectations. The critical values needed to meet performance expectations increase as the school matures. The measure has a maximum point value that is only earned if the school performs at the “exceeds expectations” level; other levels of performance receive discounted weight. The overall performance of a school in a given year is then computed on the sum of all the weighted performance scores for all the measures that pertain to that school.

IMPLEMENTATION

The School Performance Framework was adopted in the 2012-2013 school year. The launch of the framework was accompanied by additional pages on the ASD website. The framework pages are listed in the drop-down menu under “Accountability.” As the authorizer, ASD makes no distinction between the direct-run schools it oversees and the restart operators who have received i3 grants.

The Framework is reverse-engineered from the measure that ASD uses as its target goal: to have the schools in its portfolio perform in the top 25 percent of schools in Tennessee in five years. The target is an absolute measure of achievement and presents an impossible challenge to the schools. To move into the top 25 percent in five years, schools would need to post achievement gains of 0.3 standard deviations every year, an unheard of occurrence. Consequently, the system sets the schools up to fail from the outset.

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The sheer complexity of the School Performance Framework is daunting. Separate rating schemes exist for the various school models. The expected levels of performance ratchet up each year of operation, and the benchmarks for comparison change annually as well. The complexity implies that the ASD has an underlying concept of how the schools ought to perform over time. However, there is no empirical basis for it. Specifically, the focus on linear progression in precise increments every year in every dimension of the school's performance seems arbitrary and not reflective of the experience of the charter restart operators studied in the Implementation Study of this evaluation. The weighting of performance points—specifically, a school can only receive the full complement of performance points on any measure if it performs above the level that ASD itself has determined to be sufficient to meet expectations—seems counterproductive.

A second concern with the Framework is its heavy emphasis on compliance reporting. Much of the substance of the framework is driven by the stream of reports that the restart schools owe ASD in their authorizer capacity. The majority of school leaders and CMO CEOs in Tennessee found the reporting burden to be significant.

The third drawback is the plethora of “do or die” points in the Framework. The Framework has nine “Threshold Criteria” that can activate immediate review of a school

The final issue with the School Performance Framework is that it essentially re-regulates the charter schools.

if any are triggered. These include low academic performance for the school, as well as missing any of an unspecified list of priority compliance requirements. The remainder of the Threshold Criteria concern fiscal health and financial

management; they are structured so that the ASD could call for a review if a school or CMO had a few days of sub-par fiscal reserves or had lower than expected enrollment for a week or so. These thresholds apply separately from the Performance Composite and

serve as a double layer of accountability.

The final issue with the School Performance Framework is that it essentially re-regulates the charter schools. The fundamental bargain of the charter policy is to award qualified organizations the right to operate a school and then to allow the operator considerable discretion during the term of the charter. Absent gross malfeasance, the school has the period of its term to prove its worth and earn the right to have its charter renewed; if the performance doesn't warrant continuation, then the school may face revocation of its charter. The primary objective of the Charter Restart Model built on the bargain by putting decision-making and operating latitude into the hands of the operators, as they are closest to the students and can best assess how to match resources to meet their needs. The structure of the School Performance Framework does not support either the legislative intent of the charter law or the spirit of the Charter Restart Model.

Performance Meetings



DESIGN

The Charter Restart Model includes three performance review meetings each year to “monitor quality and review performance.”

The ASD engaged the services of Massachusetts-based SchoolWorks, a national consulting group that conducts school inspections, to collaborate with ASD staff on annual school reviews. As described in the School Practice Review Reports, the purpose is:

to provide school and ASD leadership the opportunity to engage in, and receive, qualitative feedback tied to indicators for school improvement. They are also opportunities for school leaders to engage in reflection, a starting point for mid-year collaborative planning for school teams, and an opportunity for the ASD leadership to identify areas in which it can better serve and support *schools*. [emphasis added.]

The SPR protocol and review process provides a third-party perspective on current school quality for all students. The report documents the team's ratings for key questions within each of the four domains identified within the SPR protocol: instruction, students' opportunities to learn, educators' opportunities to learn, and leadership. While on site, evidence collection continues through additional document reviews, classroom visits and interviews with key school stakeholders. After collecting evidence, the team meets to confirm, refute and

modify its hypotheses about school performance. The SPR team uses evidence collected through these events to develop ratings in relation to the protocol's criteria and indicators.¹²

T IMPLEMENTATION

As described on the ASD website description of the School Performance Framework, the ASD meets with each school three times a year to review performance and set targets for future effort. The report from the School Practice Review and the ratings on the School Performance Framework provide the evidentiary basis of the meetings.

It should be stressed that the School Practice Reviews are focused on inputs and processes that SchoolWorks has identified as associated with high-quality schools. This point is important because the review rests on an assumption that schools that follow the particular habits that the SchoolWorks protocol looks for will produce strong academic results for their students. (The research foundation for the chosen areas of focus is not presented on SchoolWorks, Inc.'s website but the protocols follow the general approach of the "effective schools" movement.)¹³ If anything, these reviews encourage consistent habits by students and teachers; it is less clear that they drive overall academic improvement.

The school performance meetings are structured to review the results of the school reviews and scores on the School Performance Framework. The ASD team conceives of these meetings as collaborative, but the majority of school leaders viewed them as hierarchical accountability reviews between themselves and their authorizer. Schools and CMOs are permitted to provide clarification or amplify on the findings and are encouraged to reflect for themselves on possible areas for improvement.

The School Practice Reviews are summarized for the ASD into SPR Trend Reports. The Trend Report allows the ASD to see patterns of strengths and weaknesses across the schools. The report of January 2014, for example, showed that the majority of the sixteen schools in the ASD portfolio at that time needed improvement or had no effective practice in many critical areas, including academic intervention, behavioral intervention, establishing clear learning goals, aligning goals and instruction, strategies to develop students' higher order thinking skills, or professional development.¹⁴ With widespread challenges of the sort revealed by the Trend Report, it is difficult to understand the position of the ASD that further support to schools and CMOs was not part of the ASD's scope.

Convening Charter Restart Operators as a Community of Practice

DESIGN

Since the restart operators are mostly smaller-scale CMOs, the need for mutual support and joint activity was considered essential in the original proposal to the i3 competition. Pooling the collective wisdom of the CMO leaders holds the possibility of a wider experience base and a chance for mutually beneficial action. NSNO convened all the restart operator leaders from New Orleans and Tennessee as a first Community of Practice. The Tennessee CMO leaders found the experience useful but the travel requirement inconvenient. Instead, they chose to remain in Tennessee for future meetings and looked to ASD to organize them.

IMPLEMENTATION

ASD hosted several meetings for operators in 2014 and 2015. These meetings were in addition to the on-boarding sessions for new operators that were discussed above as part of incubation support. CEO leaders were surveyed about the frequency and content of the meetings that ASD

organized. They reported that ASD has hosted several meetings for the CMOs in addition to their school-level meetings. The agendas typically pertain to problems that the CMO leaders and their teams

have identified. The CMO responses suggest that ASD took a leadership role in identifying issues that need attention. Several working groups were formed that blended ASD staff and CMO personnel. Some of the groups worked collaboratively to craft possible solutions and others appeared to have had ASD present solutions for the group to ratify before presenting to the larger community of operators. One CMO leader suggested that decisions in the full community were reached by a vote of the CMOs. The remainder of respondents indicated that the focus of the meetings was to address issues primarily of concern to the ASD, but did not cover any formative or developmental issues.

The larger concern from a policy vantage lies in the practice of constraining the discretion of individual CMOs and operators -- through collective pressure or outright imposition -- to attain ends of interest to the ASD. The fundamental bargain of the charter school model lies in tension with “district-like” practices to create uniformity across the networks

The larger concern from a policy vantage lies in the practice of constraining the discretion of individual CMOs and operators -- through collective pressure or outright imposition -- to attain ends of interest to the ASD.

or schools. The balance may skew towards uniform policies for matters that are directly tied to equity, such as expulsion policies or community-wide enrollment rules. The risk, however, lies in how easily the list of “desirable” practices can morph and lead to critical erosion of the foundational values of autonomy and operating discretion that are the hallmark of the Charter Restart Model.

Summary of Findings

Over the past four years, the program partners have successfully implemented the goals and subgoals of the Charter Restart Model in New Orleans that were specified in the application to the i3 Fund. In Tennessee, the ASD has implemented many of the components it was originally committed to adopt. The evaluation can safely conclude that the project partners fully complied with their grant commitments.

The landscape in New Orleans and Tennessee looks different today as a result of the Charter Restart Model. In New Orleans, the city has witnessed the restart of 13 schools, chosen by awarding operating privileges to CMOs who had worked with similar students. However, the selection process was uneven over the span of the project, leading to a number of awards to operators that in other selection rounds would have been declined. NSNO and RSD secured an array of school and CMO supports, ranging from professional development to strategic planning to coaching and thought partnership on day-to-day operating challenges to help the restart operators in their quest to improve the public education landscape with more high-quality schools.

Together, RSD and NSNO established on-going community standards for school quality, including academic performance targets, community targets for growing the number of high-quality seats in the city and ensuring equity of access and support for students who by virtue of their education profile are vulnerable to marginalization.

The Charter Restart Model also succeeded in the final area of dissemination and replication. Educators across the country know about the Charter Restart Model through a variety of dissemination tools such as written guides, direct technical assistance and participation in conferences and meetings. As a result, other communities have adopted features of the Charter Restart Model, and more are considering it. One replication site was launched in Tennessee serving Memphis and Nashville. A total of 12 Tennessee schools were transitioned as charter restarts.

As the lead project partners admit, there has been less success on the desired impacts that the goals were intended to create. Some of the responsibility stems from decisions by RSD and NSNO to retreat on some elements of the Charter Restart strategy at various points over the course of the project. The pressure to launch the project quickly meant that critical planning and coordination never happened. Early intentions to have open and continuing dialogue with the community shifted to a more reserved posture. Changes in the selection process led to the launch of three schools that were chaotic and

unstable, and eventually two were separated from the project.

Even with more favorable origins, most of the restart schools have had rocky starts. The development and support of CMO and school leaders have proved both vital and difficult to provide in a consistent and effective manner. As a result of these and other factors, the schools under the Charter Restart Model have not met their performance targets to this point but several have demonstrated the ability to refocus their efforts and post modest improvements. Further, the decision to allow restarts to open with an entry grade and grow an additional grade each year and delays in the closing/restarts of some of the schools have delayed the date by which the Charter Restart Model will reach the full number of students it committed to serve. These events also had a negative impact on the evaluation of impact for the overall project by dampening the statistical ability to detect meaningful effects.

The challenges that were identified in the ASD replication of the Charter Restart Model in many ways mirror the experience in New Orleans. The ASD deserves praise for the rapid

...perhaps the best result is the broadening of political and civic support for strong public education. This could not have occurred without aligned strategy of closing schools and replacing them with new operators, a continued and transparent focus on performance and an on-going commitment and action to address performance failures in a consistent and expeditious manner.

start-up of its multi-faceted operations. Its continued focus on improving the lowest schools in Tennessee deserves greater support.

The schools that have been restarted in Tennessee have followed a similar performance path, which lends additional evidence to the collective view in New Orleans that restarts are more difficult than starting a school from scratch. This finding

is more troubling in Memphis and Nashville, for two reasons. The communities do not have the extent of experience with school improvement that occurred in Louisiana nor the experience supporting charter school operations and, until recently, low-performing restarts have had few resources to help them improve. In addition, the smaller number of charter schools in those cities means that each school carries more weight in the ongoing policy environment; for them, the spotlight is brighter and hotter.

As the formal grant period of the Charter Restart Model draws to a close, perhaps the best result is the broadening of political and civic support for strong public education. This

could not have occurred without aligned strategy of closing schools and replacing them with new operators, a continued and transparent focus on performance and an on-going commitment and action to address performance failures in a consistent and expeditious manner.

Looking Ahead

As noted repeatedly in the media coverage of the New Orleans education scene a decade after Hurricane Katrina, while there may be debate about how far the education sector in New Orleans has progressed,

everyone believes that further improvement is necessary.

Merely saying “More” fails to illuminate the available pathways or to identify the

opportunities and challenges each entails. The interviews and observations that underlie this study included future-oriented questions about desired next steps and barriers that might affect further progress.

There is no argument that New Orleans still suffers from significant deficits in services and resources to help the schools further advance.

There is no argument that New Orleans still suffers from significant deficits in services and resources to help the schools advance further. From the vantage of the CMO leaders, there is widespread agreement that the schools and the community at large have continuing problems meeting the needs of all students. Specifically, CMO leaders spoke of the need for continued advocacy for better services for English language learners, students who have mental health issues and over-aged students seeking to complete their secondary education. Educators are confident that with appropriate programming and support, each of these groups can successfully engage in school and progress towards graduation.

CMO leaders also spoke of the need for more leadership from RSD on facilities, with support needed from NSNO. CMO leaders reported continuing need for a better system to identify resources in the RSD, NSNO and community-based agencies. There were several examples given: social services, youth development, testing and accountability guidance, mechanics for midyear student transfers, and professional development opportunities that are customized to school and teacher circumstances. This appears to be an area in which education technology could be an efficient and effective solution.

With the range of demands that CMO leaders face, from teacher and student recruitments to general operations to targeted problem solving and incident management, it is perhaps understandable that the focus of CMO leaders is on tangible goods and other

resources. Whether this finding reflects the current moment in the maturation of the all-charter district or signals a more permanent attribute of it remains to be determined and is worth further study.

The Charter Restart Model project leaders have a system-wide perspective when considering future directions and challenges. They uniformly identify the current

NSNO and RSD staff members appreciate the gains to date but are focused and determined to continue the work of improving outcomes for New Orleans' youth.

operational barriers: high-quality talent, special services for students who need them, extended student work to prepare them for post-secondary options, and long-term stewardship of the all-charter district. They are keenly aware

of the need to realize higher levels of achievement and growth in the students of New Orleans. NSNO and RSD staff members appreciate the gains to date but are focused and determined to continue the work of improving outcomes for New Orleans' youth. The balance between solving present-day problems and building policies and programs to ensure future improvements and survival of the current system is an ongoing tension.

Current Priorities

An ongoing challenge concerns the “care and feeding” of the decentralized all-charter district; that is, the network of networks and individual school operators that make up the bulk of the New Orleans public education landscape. One of the real struggles of the all-charter district is the need for balance between the autonomy of schools and the reality that some functions are inefficiently or inequitably provided in a decentralized environment. Multiple parallel investments in functions with large first-unit costs is unwise. The calculus of shared services is largely unexplored in New Orleans, but should be based either in overwhelming efficiency gains or in compelling evidence that only through common provision can equity be achieved or preserved.

Other examples involve the handling of externalities that arise when charter school operators act to make their operations as efficient as possible. Under these conditions it is possible that some students will not have equitable treatment, with adverse consequences for their education. To date, the RSD-affiliated charter school executives have acted to address any equity issues that have surfaced and several common practices have resulted. School leaders and CMOs have agreed to trade a bit of their autonomy for the benefit of greater equity for all students. Similar practice has occurred

in Tennessee.

However, it bears noting that the collective action thus far is voluntary and therefore tenuous. Its preservation is vital to the ongoing success of the all-charter system and thus deserves greater attention. Operators must conclude that the benefits of collaboration are worth the effort and adjustments to common practice. If that tradeoff fails, it is possible

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that one or more operators would decline to participate in some or all of the collective actions. At that point, either the operator becomes a free-rider -- the start of a very slippery slope -- or the school or network chooses to affiliate with OPSB.

The RSD and NSNO have much still to do to address current issues. The relationship between RSD, NSNO and the OPSB is in flux and demands careful attention. As the Charter Restart Model project sunsets, RSD and OPSB and the Louisiana Department of Education have forged a Cooperative Endeavor Agreement. It lays out a number of collaborative steps between OPSB and RSD to conduct joint planning for schools and programs, to extend the single enrollment system to eventually include all OPSB schools, to allocate funding to meet the needs of at-risk students and several more activities. Moreover, as the 2015-2016 school year begins, the new OPSB superintendent has been in place only a few months and his plans and priorities are as yet undisclosed. The scope of the agreement and the need for careful implementation will require continuing effort and review.

Attention to current challenges intertwines with building capacities for the future. All the parties speak of the dire current need for talent in schools, in CMOs and in the education institutions such as OPSB, RSD and NSNO. As well, NSNO and RSD have expanded their efforts to bring greater strength to bear in the development of pipelines to produce a steady stream of talent into the future. These twin lines of work are important and necessary.

Still, there is a real and likely event on the horizon that has not received the attention it deserves, especially since it could have serious consequences for the success of the larger education reform efforts in New Orleans. Teachers and administrators in almost every restart school studied by the evaluators reported they anticipated near-term staff turnover at higher rates than the past few years. While the NOLA educator workforce members are younger than the national teacher profile, they are also better educated

on average, less well compensated than OPSB teachers and report more working hours per week. No one is questioning their dedication to their roles today, but the opportunity

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costs compound over time. Veteran teachers and leaders alike spoke about the intense demands of their roles and the growing toll it took on personal facets of their lives. NSNO and the leaders of

schools and CMOs need to plan -- strategically, compassionately and proactively -- for a dramatic drop in teacher retention in the coming years. In doing so, they can minimize predatory recruitment of talent and the system friction such practices would engender

Strategic Choices

Looking forward, a fundamental strategic decision about the path to future improvements concerns whether to look within New Orleans or outside for the drivers of further improvement in school quality. This is not a purely academic exercise, since each approach has both advantages and disadvantages.

Seeking to rely further on local providers has some merit. The past five years have shown that the high saturation of charter schools in NOLA has made it difficult to attract outside providers to NOLA. CMOs from other parts of the country seek locations where they can build a cluster of schools, but New Orleans is already facing a modest degree of excess capacity among existing schools.

However, the local growth approach carries risks. Research evidence raises doubts about the degree of improvement that can occur in existing schools. Charter schools were found to achieve a level of performance -- high or low -- within a few years of opening and not change much thereafter. Accordingly, CMOs typically cannot replicate their way to improvement; their replications are more likely to be equal to or below the level of quality of the current portfolio.¹⁶

The implication is that absent strong standards and intentional intervention with low-performing schools, prevailing levels of performance would likely persist. Thus a “stay local” approach hinges critically on the sustained function of the Goal 2 components related to quality and continuous improvement. Even if the Goal 2 components are sustained, there is risk: New Orleans has strong CMOs, but the reliance on local operators to fuel future improvements would mean they would shoulder much of the burden of

future restarts. And, given the risk explained above that bad actors/free riders could crop up at any time, there is risk inherent in having one homegrown CMO take over a failing school of a fellow homegrown CMO in an ecosystem that depends in large part on good faith among CMO players (since all future restarts will be charter-to-charter turnarounds).

The choice of relying on local operators to drive continued improvements introduces serious questions for NSNO and RSD to resolve. In the context of a decentralized and autonomous system of operators, it is necessary for RSD and NSNO to have clarity about their use of resources. NSNO admits to a degree of inconsistency about

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tying future funding decisions to performance: should the highest performers receive preference to support their continued improvement or should struggling schools be targeted in a good-faith effort to improve them before the end of their charter terms? The answer has important implications for current and future organization and function of the all-charter district.

A different approach may be needed to take NOLA schooling from a “C” to a “B” or higher. The national findings about charter school improvement over time suggest the need for new operators, possibly including spin-offs or subsidiaries of existing CMOs, to bring higher quality designs to the community. Moreover, an external strategy necessarily would involve a decision to overstock the market by creating more seats than currently exist. It is unclear how attractive the prospect would be to a high-quality CMO outside of New Orleans: the environment is obviously charter-friendly, but building brand identity in a new location and proving itself in the local environment might entail too much uncertainty. The risks for the community also are pretty clear: unless done carefully, an equilibrium could be reached where most schools are under-enrolled and unstable. Such a strategy would be successful only if a) parents make academic quality a priority in their school choices, b) high quality providers are willing to open schools in a tight market and c) there is sufficient oversaturation to prevent an unstable equilibrium of under-enrolled schools.

It is likely that both approaches to continued improvement will be needed to achieve success. In whatever manner willing restart operators are recruited, the Charter Restart Model has demonstrated that intervention with failing schools can be successfully managed with a restart approach. The findings laid out in the report also show that the infrastructure is in place to stimulate higher levels of school quality if the restart school’s performance is not strong enough. The past five years of school restarts have contributed

to an increase in public confidence that change for the better is possible and that charter schools are a vital tool to achieving those results in New Orleans. Finally, the community and its education leaders have the political will to insist on excellent schools for all students and to take the necessary steps to create them.

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