



A New Approach to School Turnaround: Charter Operators Managing District Schools

Policy Brief

Susan Bowles Therriault

American Institutes for Research

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**The research for this Policy Brief was funded by the
Massachusetts Charter Public School Association.**

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Executive Summary

The state-appointed receiver of the Lawrence Public School District (LPS) has received praise for the early success of the open-architecture approach to supporting schools. A key component of this approach is providing targeted and customized support to schools, especially in the district's lowest performing schools. The district offers intensive support to its neediest schools by leveraging partnerships with high-performing charter operators and other external providers, who provide leadership of these district schools through a management contract.

Because the pool of experienced turnaround partners is limited, charter school operators with proven track records of success have stepped in to operate four of the five district schools that are managed by external operators. The result is a turnaround strategy that blends charter practices in a district context, providing a unique opportunity to study the development and outcomes of such partnership. Indeed, the early success of these charter-managed schools, in terms of growth in student outcomes, has heralded much attention on this new strategy (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015).

Leveraging the perspectives of charter operators, district leaders, and state officials, this policy brief examines the LPS use of charter operators as managers of district schools with a goal of providing recommendations for future district turnaround efforts, drawing from the expertise of charter operators. An analysis of the LPS turnaround strategy reveals three key stages of turnaround: (1) recruitment, (2) start-up, and (3) implementation. Throughout each of these stages, charter operators and district leaders had opportunities to forge relationships, align their vision for collaboration and school improvement, and explore the boundaries of autonomy in their schools. Generally, findings suggest that:

- In all cases, the **charter operators acknowledged that with this type of engagement with the district receiver came uncertainty about how they can adapt their existing model** in the more restrictive environment of a district.
- **Charter operators engaged in Lawrence's external operator turnaround strategy in a political environment that is currently supportive of this invitation; however, they lack the legal authority provided by the state's Commonwealth Charter Schools and Horace Mann Charter Schools.** For example, charter operators who manage LPS schools have a one-year memorandum of understanding (MOU). Commonwealth and Horace Mann charter schools are given a five-year contract.
- **The time required to negotiate an MOU resulted in significant limitations on the time needed by the charter operators to hire, prepare their school buildings, train staff, and engage in community outreach** prior to the start of school.
- Ultimately, **the shared vision between the charter operators and the Lawrence receiver is the major incentive for engaging in this experiment** in school turnaround; beyond this, however, there are very few incentives.
- **The lack of incentives limited the LPS receiver's ability to recruit external operators**, especially the experienced pool of charter operators to manage Lawrence's lowest performing schools.
- **The charter operators who are managing the Lawrence schools bring with them substantial experience and infrastructure, which mitigates some risk**, including staffing, staff development, and adaptation of their school models. In each case, charter operators reported drawing significant amounts of support from their organizations.

Lawrence's strategy for providing intensive support to a district's lowest performing schools through an external operator is new but shows some promise. In the current environment, however, there are significant limitations to expanding this strategy. In an environment with a limited pool of experienced and proven external operators, legal and contractual uncertainty, and few incentives, there are some actions and considerations that may be taken to limit the risk to external operators and grow the field.

State leaders and policymakers as well as district leaders can:

- Capitalize on the political will that supports the external operator strategy to **consider clarifying the authorization of the district–external operator relationships**.
- **Develop a set of incentives for external operators** engaging in this work. For example, resources and funding in the first year were cited as needs by the charter operators.
- **Provide training and support to districts and external operators**. This may include offering facilitators to negotiate the initial and ongoing issues that arise in terms of the external operators' autonomy.
- **Study the implementation of the external operator school turnaround strategy** to improve the conditions for implementation in the state and to ensure that it is realizing the ultimate goal of improving educational outcomes for students.

Districts can:

- **Dedicate ongoing support to the external operators** as they assimilate to their roles.
- **Develop structures that allow for the sharing of promising practices** between the district-managed and external operator-managed schools.

External operators need to:

- **Prepare for the uncertainty and risk of managing a district school, and be ready to adapt their models to the specific needs of their students**. The experienced charter operators engaged in Lawrence had integrated a purposeful effort to continually improve and adapt the model to fit the needs of their students.
- **Ensure that their vision and the district leader's vision align**, or at least accommodate the vision of the external operator.

Introduction

External operator-managed district schools in the Lawrence Public School District (LPS) are a new phenomenon, and they are being closely watched by policymakers and educational leaders throughout Massachusetts and in other states (Horn, 2015; Public Impact, 2014). In Lawrence’s external operator strategy, experienced charter school operators are filling a need in the traditional, district-run school system. By bringing over charter models and practices, experience, and capacity to low-performing, district-run schools, charter school operators provide intensive support to the neediest schools in the context of a traditional district school system.

Indeed, early reports of schools managed by LPS and schools managed by charter operators highlight their success, and such reports have only bolstered statewide interest in the effectiveness of this new turnaround strategy (Khalid, 2014; Vaznis, 2014). The idea is a new one¹, however, and there are still many questions about how this approach actually works. This policy brief describes the process of developing and implementing a turnaround strategy that includes the perspectives of involved charter operators, district administrators, and state officials affiliated with supporting LPS in this experiment.

Background

For decades, charter schools and district-run schools have been placed on opposing sides by advocates and policymakers. With support from the state and other partners, the LPS state receiver brought these two seemingly opposing ideas together as a turnaround strategy for the district’s lowest performing schools. In Lawrence, for the lowest performing schools,² the district provides intensive, school-level support by turning over operation of the school to an external operator but keeping the school as part of the district (see Text Box 2. Lawrence Public Schools and State Receivership: Background). The external operator, often an experienced charter school operator, is, in turn, given autonomy to oversee key elements of the school, including staffing, budgeting, curriculum, and instruction. The district then holds the external operator accountable for results, which have shown promise in terms of student academic growth since 2012 (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). The strategy of having an external operator manage a district school represents an innovation in school turnaround; in

Text Box 1. Definitions

In this policy brief, *external operator* is a general term, and *charter operators* refers to a specific type of external operator. Definitions of these terms are as follows:

External operator: An organization or entity that manages a district school. Although the majority of these organizations in Lawrence are charter operators, at least one school is run by the Lawrence Teachers Union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers.

Charter operator: An organization that has experience operating charter schools; for the purposes of this brief, a type of external operator that also manages a district school in Lawrence. In the LPS district, four of the five external operator schools are charter school operators (see Exhibit 2).

¹ Although there are examples of charter school operators taking over low-performing schools (e.g., Philadelphia and New Orleans), in the Massachusetts LPS strategy, the district still plays a substantial oversight role, which distinguishes it from approaches used in other districts.

² The low-performing schools are those that were identified as Level 4 schools (low-performing) by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE).

Massachusetts, LPS serves as the first district to be led as such. The approach brings experienced charter operators who are willing to take a risk into the traditional, district-run school system.

The LPS strategy to engage charter operators in the turnaround of the district's lowest performing schools presents an opportunity to examine a question at the forefront of the charter school debate: Can charter school operators achieve results in the context of a traditional, district-run school?

The external operators' strategy places charter school operators directly into the traditional district school setting to test whether their models and strategies work in a traditional school district, without access to the full slate of autonomies traditionally granted to operators of charter schools. This represents a shift from the two primary forms of charter schools in Massachusetts: (1) Commonwealth Charter Schools, and (2) Horace Mann Charter Schools. The Commonwealth and the Horace Mann charter schools have many of the same autonomies by law³, with the exception of how the schools are authorized and whether staff are required to be part of the teachers' union contract. Commonwealth charters are authorized by the Massachusetts Board of Education (BOE), and staff are not required to be part of a teachers union. Horace Mann charters are authorized by the district school committee, the superintendent, and the teachers' union president; then they must be approved by the Massachusetts BOE. Staff in the Horace Mann charters are members of the teachers union and the receiver and teachers union's collectively bargained contract; however, the operator may negotiate waivers on aspects of the teachers' union contract.

LPS charter operators who manage district schools present a different case. In the LPS case, charter operators are afforded more autonomy than traditional schools; however, being part of the district still binds them to some limitations of the district school. For example, in Lawrence, all schools—including those run by charter operators—follow the same student enrollment system, by neighborhood. If they were authorized as a Commonwealth or Horace Mann charter school, the operators would pull from a broader community and conduct a lottery to determine student enrollment. In addition, the LPS external operators, although free to select and hire teachers, must allow staff to participate in the teachers union; in the commonwealth charter context, an operator typically does not have a unionized teaching force.⁴ Exhibit 1 provides an overview of the differences in the features of the Commonwealth charter schools, Horace Mann charter schools, and LPS charter operator-managed district schools.

In the case of the LPS, three charter operators, knowing the potential risk and uncertainty of the LPS experiment, chose to take on the challenge of turning around four of Lawrence's lowest performing schools.⁵ This policy brief describes the methodology of the LPS turnaround strategy and then discusses the findings from the perspectives of charter operators managing district schools, LPS district leaders, and state officials who supported the turnaround efforts. The brief concludes with recommendations for charter operators, district leaders, and state officials and policymakers considering the use of a similar strategy in future district turnaround efforts.

³See Massachusetts General Law Chapter 71, section 89 (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/ch71s89.html>).

⁴ Critics of the charter school movement frequently note that (a) the charter operators have more flexibility in staffing because teachers are not part of a collectively bargained contract (Stuit & Smith, 2009); (b) the student enrollment lottery system inherently draws a district's top students away from the district (Simon, 2003; Strauss, 2013); and (c) starting a school is easier than turning around a low-performing school (Smarik, 2010).

⁵ There are five external, operator-run schools in Lawrence, but this brief focuses on the four schools that are run by charter school operators.

Exhibit 1. Comparison of Features of Commonwealth Charter, Horace Mann Charter, and LPS Charter Managed Schools

FEATURE	Commonwealth Charter⁶	Horace Mann Charter School	LPS Charter Operator Managed District Schools
Legal Authority	Massachusetts General Law Ch. 71, section 89	Massachusetts General Law Ch. 71, section 89	Locally developed Memorandum of understanding (MOU)
Authorizer	Massachusetts Board of Elementary (BOE) and Secondary Education (BESE)	First approved by district school committee, superintendent, and teacher’s union president; then approved by the Massachusetts BESE	Receiver and charter operator
Term	Five-year charter term (5-year renewal periods)	Five-year charter term (5-year renewal periods)	One-year MOU
Facility	Charter autonomy: facilities decisions made by charter board	District-determined (existing or new school)	Existing district facilities ⁷
Student Enrollment	Lottery	Lottery	District enrollment zones or district-determined
Staffing	Full autonomy: Staffing terms and decisions made by charter board	Semi-autonomous: Staffing determined by operator within teachers’ contract requirements (some waivers may be negotiated)	Semi-autonomous: Staffing determined by charter operator within teachers’ contract requirements (receiver may waive aspects of the contract)
Scheduling and Time	Charter autonomy: School year/day schedule determined by charter board and approved by state	District and operator determined and approved by District first, and then by state	Receiver and operator determined and approved by state
Curriculum and Instruction⁸	Charter autonomy	Charter autonomy	External operator autonomy
Professional Development	Charter autonomy	Charter autonomy	Charter autonomy
Budget and Funding	Charter autonomy: Annual budget approved by charter school board, per pupil allocation (state).	Annual budget approved by local school committee, per pupil allocation (local school committee)	Receiver determined
Governance	Full autonomy: Charter board of trustees	Semi-autonomous: Charter board of trustees; board of trustees approved by the school committee.	Receiver and charter operator also reports to the charter management organization trustees

⁶ In Massachusetts there are two types of charter schools: (1) Commonwealth charters, which have the full slate of autonomy, and (2) Horace Mann charters, which have some—but not all—of the autonomies, dependent on the decisions of the district superintendent and teachers’ union. The description provided in Exhibit 1 describes autonomies of Commonwealth charter schools.

⁷ Phoenix Academy Lawrence started in an existing building but was a new school in terms of staff and students.

⁸ Curriculum for all types of schools must align to the Massachusetts state standards.

The Case Study: Lawrence Public School District

As of the 2014–15 school year, external operators managed five low-performing schools in LPS; four of those schools were managed by charter operators. As part of the open-architecture strategy, the external operators are given full autonomy over staffing, budgeting, scheduling, curriculum, instruction, and building operations. This autonomy allows participants to rebuild all aspects of the school to meet the specific needs of its students.

A combination of state law and political will created the conditions for using external operators to run district schools. Under state receivership, all responsibility for the district is placed in the hands of the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE Commissioner) and an appointed receiver. Backed by Massachusetts General Law,⁹ a Level 5 district receiver possesses the autonomy to oversee the governance of the district and to modify school schedule, curriculum, instruction, budget, and staffing. In addition to state law, the political will offered through the support of the ESE Commissioner, the Massachusetts ESE, and other state political leaders allows the receiver a high level of flexibility in making decisions that can fundamentally change how the district and its schools operate. With these enabling conditions in place, the strategy of having external operators run the district's lowest performing schools can be implemented. Exhibit 2 provides an overview of the schools and their operators.

Exhibit 2. Lawrence Public Schools External Operator–Managed Schools, 2014–15

Lawrence Public School	External Operator	Level	Type
Community Day Arlington	The Community Group	Elementary	Charter operator
Oliver Partnership	American Federation of Teachers	Middle	Teachers union
Phoenix Academy Lawrence	Phoenix Charter Academy Network	High	Charter operator
UP Academy Leonard	Unlocking Potential Educational Network	Middle	Charter operator
UP Academy Oliver	Unlocking Potential Educational Network	Middle	Charter operator

Four schools are run by charter operators, and one school is run by the Lawrence Teachers Union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers. Three of the four schools (Oliver Partnership, UP Academy Leonard, and UP Academy Oliver) began external operator operations during the 2012–13 school year, and the fourth school, Community Day Arlington, began operations in the 2013–14 school year. The three middle school partners used a phase-in approach in which the operators took over one grade each school year; by 2014–15, they had taken over operation of all the middle grades. The elementary school partner also used a phased-in approach. Phoenix Academy Lawrence started as a new school in the district, and the Phoenix Charter Academy Network began operating all the high school grade levels in the 2012–13 school year. This policy brief focuses on only those external operators that are also charter operators because this role relates to the central question of the policy brief. Therefore, the case is limited to four of the five external, operator-run schools.

⁹ For more information, see Massachusetts General Law, Chapter 69, Section 1K, *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*, at <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter69/Section1k>

Text Box 2. Lawrence Public Schools and State Receivership: Background

In November 2011, the Massachusetts BOE voted to place the LPS into state receivership for chronic underperformance. This action meant that the Massachusetts Department of ESE assumed responsibility for LPS, including the responsibilities of both the superintendent and school committee. In January 2012, ESE placed the LPS under the auspices of a receiver, Jeffrey Riley, to develop and implement a plan for turning around the district and to take control of all aspects of the district's operations.

The district's turnaround plan, released in May 2012, provides details regarding the four key strategies for turnaround, which include the following: "(1) Extended time, strategic use of data, and high expectations for academic achievement; (2) Recruitment, retention, and cultivation of great people and proven partners; (3) Strengthened support and engagement for students beyond academics; and (4) Increased autonomy and accountability for schools to promote student success" (Massachusetts Department of ESE, 2012, p. 3).

Open Architecture. The LPS turnaround strategy focuses on an open-architecture model. Open architecture places decisions about teaching and learning at the school level and focuses on a district role that differentiates support to schools based on their needs. The idea of providing intensive support for the lowest performing schools by identifying external operators (e.g., charter school operators) to operate the schools is a component or manifestation of the LPS open architecture, which has its roots in district portfolio management style. The hallmarks of this type of management style, which has been around for decades (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998), are that schools earn autonomy over staffing, schedule, instruction, curriculum, and other aspects of schooling. When schools are failing to serve students well (as demonstrated by poor or declining student outcomes), the district provides more targeted and intensive support to increase the schools' capacity to improve student outcomes and use autonomy to ensure that students are achieving at high levels. Intensive support through an external operator managing the school is a new aspect of the portfolio management approach.

Methods and Analysis

This case study of the charter operators serving as external operators running district schools in Lawrence is a result of four months of data collection between October 2014 and January 2015. The focus of the brief is concentrated expressly on charter operators' engagement as external operators that oversee district schools. Data were collected through a review of extant documents and interviews with state officials, district officials, and the external operators, including school leaders and charter management organization leaders. In total, 14 interviews were conducted. These data were transcribed and coded to identify key themes.

Findings

Three key stages emerge as critical when considering the strategy of using charter operators as external operators to turn around district schools. These stages are: (1) recruitment, (2) start-up, and (3) implementation. Each of these stages engages the state, district, and external operators in different ways, with recruitment and start-up primarily in the hands of the district (with support from the state), and implementation in the hands of the external operators (with support from the district). One theme that runs through all stages of the external operator strategy is time and the rapid pace in which this new strategy was put in place. The findings are organized to follow these key milestones and to discuss the perspectives of the key actors in the process as well as the challenges and successes encountered.

Stage 1. Recruitment

State and district respondents initially looked for two criteria when identifying potential charter operators to serve as external operators: (1) a proven track record of experience and success running a school, and (2) a willingness to consider operating a district school. According to state and district respondents, it was fairly easy to identify candidates that met the first criterion, but finding candidates that were willing to “take the neighborhood kids, [because] there is not [an authorized] charter, there is no [student] lottery, and... to be unionized” proved challenging. Key to the recruitment stage was identifying a pool of candidates, developing a working relationship, and ensuring there were some, although limited, incentives, such as a larger operating budget through the use of Title 1, 1003(g) School Improvement Grant funds, called School Redesign Grants in Massachusetts.¹⁰ In many instances, state leaders and district administrators relied on preexisting relationships and ongoing conversations to encourage external operators to engage in this work.

Pool of Candidates

The most obvious pool of skilled external operators came from the state’s charter school operators¹¹ who have experience running schools; however, running a district school is new territory for these organizations and individuals.

According to the district receiver, recruitment efforts focused on one-on-one conversations about the idea. As the receiver stated, “I was just being very explicit in meetings [with the potential external providers]. I was looking for people to—under the few certain conditions (student enrollment and unionized staff)—do what they needed to run their school.” Not all of these conversations resulted in new partnerships. As one state official noted, there have been some charter operators that are involved, but there are “others that have been reluctant.” As for those charter operators who decided not to run

¹⁰ School Redesign Grants are federal funding for turning around low-performing schools offered through a competitive process. The funds are from Title I, 1003(g) School Improvement Grants.

¹¹ The Massachusetts Department of ESE’s process for qualifying external providers was also a source for candidates, although this again led to charter operators as the most obvious choice. The Massachusetts Department of ESE uses a system for qualifying all support providers, including those who oversee schools. Some of the external operators had already submitted applications to be support providers, but others had to compile lengthy applications for state approval in a very short period. The external operators reported that the paperwork and the process for applying to be a provider were an impediment and a potential barrier to other providers. As one external provider remarked, “You are invited to be part of this innovative strategy, and then [the state] tells you that you need to complete a mountain of paperwork.”

a district school, there is speculation that the risk of not being in control of *all* aspects of the school, as they would in the context of a charter school, might compromise their efforts, limit their ability to serve students, and tarnish their reputation. The external operators who decided to take the risk unanimously expressed the sentiment that the situation posed a real risk to their organizations. One external operator explained:

I mean, we knew it was a huge challenge and to some extent a risk because... we [had] one of the highest performing schools... for years, and... we knew we were going to be stepping into a turnaround Level 4 school situation, so, you know, we gave it a lot of thought.

Working Relationship

Although the state and the receiver had preexisting relationships with some charter operators who were ultimately recruited to support the LPS turnaround strategy, the relationship itself became a centerpiece of the strategy, providing the fundamental basis for building trust between the entities that started right at the beginning.

Since the concept of charter operators managing district school was new to Massachusetts, there were many unanswered questions and aspects of the work ahead that were unclear. The working relationship was critical to overcoming these challenges. All parties indicated that moving the turnaround effort forward required a great deal of discussion, but ultimately each of the parties needed to trust and buy in to the idea that this strategy could ultimately improve student outcomes. One state official commented:

The biggest challenge for recruiting them [external operators] was to give them the assurance that they'd have the same kind of autonomies and authority that they have under the charter school statute, because we brought them into the district under management contracts.

However true, it was clear to charter operators that they would be operating *outside* of the state's charter statute, in a somewhat undefined or gray policy area.

There is an inherent risk for a charter operator running a school in a receivership district; as one state official noted, a charter operator serving as an external operator is different from a charter school because "there is no guarantee of [overseeing the school] in perpetuity." One charter operator described the process as a "leap of faith." Another charter operator described the early working relationship:

Everybody was figuring out how to do this, both, you know, legally and financially, and just how was the operation going to work?... I think there was a real willingness to sort of jump in and then work it out as we moved along.

Over a period of three to four months, charter operators and the district and state officials continually worked together toward developing an MOU to guide the partnership. According to state officials and the district receiver, there were some roadblocks as the idea of charter operators overseeing district schools became concrete in terms of contracts and MOUs. There are, however, limitations to contract periods in which a district is able to engage and to obligate funds; thus, the contracts with the charter operators were limited to one year. This restriction was of concern to all parties but of greatest concern to the charter operators. The charter operators did not want to risk taking over or starting up a school and not being able to continue after the first year; the investment of time, effort, and money is significant during the first year. Being familiar with this type of start-up, potential charter operators did

not enter into this agreement lightly. In the end, the trust that was developed through the working relationship with the receiver primarily helped in overcoming this hurdle.

Incentives

The risks faced by a charter operator in running a district school are many. Most critical is that the context in which the charter operator is operating is very different from the charter school context in terms of student enrollment (neighborhood versus lottery), staffing (unionized versus nonunionized), and district engagement (e.g., meetings, shared resources, and so forth). Although these are unalterable differences between district and charter schools, respondents identified some incentives that supported this work, including: (1) mutual imperative, and (2) enabling conditions and political will.

Mutual Imperative. State officials, district administrators, and charter operators alike suggested that the shared imperative for improving student outcomes through whole-school models of improvement drove their conversations about the possibility of a charter operator managing a district school. One charter operator explained, “I knew they [ESE and the district receiver] were going to need some help at the table. So I’ve wanted to go to Lawrence.”

State officials indicated that charter operators who considered the opportunity to engage in the LPS turnaround strategy had, first and foremost, a “commitment to school turnaround.” And, over time, assurances from the district receiver and state officials facilitated this commitment; as one state official noted, the charter operators received the assurance of the ESE commissioner and the district receiver that “they [the charter operators] would have the running room to get the job done.” Beyond a commitment, charter operators universally suggested that one of the most important incentives was that the charter operators agreed with the district receiver’s philosophy and approach to improving schools. This philosophical alignment between potential operators and the district receiver should not be understated; it provided a common ground from which educators could engage.

Enabling Conditions and Political Will. Massachusetts’ efforts to engage charter operators in school turnaround is partially backed by law and by regulations, but even with these codified conditions, political will is essential to engaging charter operators. The interrelated issues of length of management contract (limited to one year for charter operators working in Lawrence), start-up costs, and commitment to continue a partnership between the district and charter operators pose challenges to implementing the external operator strategy. In other words, the current laws and regulations, while enabling, do not clearly specify how an external partner, such as a charter operator, can engage in the takeover of a low-performing school.

The contract or MOU between the receiver and the charter operators stands out as an example of this lack of specificity. Limited contract periods bound to a single year place charter operators at risk of investing in a short-term venture if political will or law changes. As one state official remarked, “The biggest impediment is this issue of whether or not [the charter operator will] invest a lot in [turning around a low-performing school] and then have to walk away...” Because the strategy is new and therefore uncharted, much is unknown about how a charter operator manages district school endures or evolves over time. Charter operators acknowledge that they took this risk because they believe in their model and because they believe that ESE or the district was unlikely to make any changes once they witnessed the success of their students.

During the recruitment phase and discussions, the district receiver’s model for supporting the charter operators emerged and evolved in response to charter needs and to the maturation of the turnaround strategy. The district began to develop a system for supporting and triaging problems as they arose. The charter operators noted that the quick responses from the district further assured them that taking the risk of working with the LPS in this endeavor was the right decision. The district receiver and the charter operators noted that despite an environment with substantial uncertainty, the willingness of the district to smooth the charter operators’ transition to being part of the district served to encourage the partnership.

Stage 2. Start-Up

External providers acknowledged that in their experience, the start-up of a charter school is an intense and time-consuming effort, but the start-up of the Lawrence charter operator-run district schools brought new challenges; many of these schools were not takeovers so much as they were the start-up of new schools. Both the district context and district requirements, as well as the limited time for preparing to open a school, are critical to these challenges. In response, the district focused on supporting the charter operators through real-time support. In some cases, the district used a phase-in approach so that charter operators could take over one grade level per year. Finally, financing the start-up of these schools was challenging because there were no additional district allocations or start-up funds. The district and charter operators identified funding sources for start-up. The following section provides additional details about start-up time, district support, phase-in, financing, staffing, and community outreach.

Start-Up Time

The start-up time for the charter operators was limited. Most of the charter operators were on board with an MOU by the spring before the start of school in the fall. Three of the four schools were operating as district schools during the spring, so the charter operators were able to begin only limited planning for start-up in the fall. The charter operators indicated that this timeline was highly challenging in terms of staffing, building preparation, and conducting community outreach. Although the charter operators had experience in all these areas, they did not typically need to complete these activities in the span of just three months before the opening of school. Although autonomy over staffing, scheduling, curriculum, and instruction was empowering to the partners, it was also overwhelming to conduct this work within an extremely compressed time frame.

District Support

According to charter operators and district officials, start-up was a very rapid learning period for all parties. The district receiver purposefully dedicated staff to address the immediate needs of the schools. The district’s effort to create a smooth transition for the charter operators helped to address issues. For example, a challenge cited by nearly all state officials, district administrators, and charter operators related to purchasing equipment and supplies. The charter operators were accustomed to buying supplies as they needed them and having those supplies in place. One charter operator remarked, “It was tough to get through the bureaucracy not so much because of the school department, but because... purchases and contracts also had to be okayed by the city.” In the district, there are requirements for purchasing; therefore, a substantial lead time is necessary if the school is to have the supplies by the start of school. Once this problem was recognized, the district liaison worked to expedite

orders, when possible, and the charter operators had to adjust their purchasing by planning ahead in a way that they did not need to do as charter operators.

Although the district receiver spent a significant amount of time supporting the charter operators, over time the district's chief redesign officer assumed the liaison responsibilities. The district liaison provided—and continues to provide—support in a variety of ways to the charter operators, but the liaison is primarily the charter operators' point person and is responsible for ensuring that district operations are supporting and not impeding school progress. As the district receiver noted:

Whether that's... having big group meetings [with the charter operators] or many individual sessions... you're asking people to plug into the district and learn the district language. And, rather than [the district staff] saying you've got to figure it out, our job was to make sure that we helped them figure it out.

The district specifically supported the charter operators in preparing the school buildings with regard to facilities and space, human resources (including information about the collective bargaining agreement), and procurement of equipment and materials.

Phase-In Approach

The phase-in strategy used by the three middle school partners actually helped with the charter operators' and the district's transition. According to the receiver and state officials, initially the plan was that each of the charter operators would take over the whole school beginning in the 2012–13 school year. Due to time limitations, however, a decision was made to phase in the charter operators' management of the middle schools. This approach meant that each charter operator assumed responsibility for one grade during each school year, until the partner eventually managed the entire middle school.

Charter operators assumed responsibility for one grade each school year, with the exception of Phoenix Academy Lawrence, which opened the full school in the first year. Initially, the receiver did not want the charter operators to take a phased-in approach; however, for a variety of reasons, including the limited time that the charter operators had to open the schools, phase-in proved to be the best course of action. On reflection, the receiver stated:

“[Phase-in] was the best thing that ever happened... because [the charter operators'] being able to... start it small, doing it well, and then building it out is much better than trying to do it really big and getting it wrong.” In addition, the phase-in method provided an opportunity for the district to orient itself toward supporting the charter operators and allowed the charter operators to “get their feet wet a little bit, and [the district] ironed out the bugs.”

A key factor that contributed to the smooth transition was the receiver's hiring of “transition principals” to oversee the school grade levels that were phasing out (being phased in to the charter operators). These principals were experienced and understood their role to be one of supporting the school through the transition to the charter operators' oversight. These principals made it easier for the charter operators to develop a positive working relationship with the schools they were taking over.

Funding

Financing also required a phase-in strategy. The goal of the district is to be able to fund each charter operator's school with the funds allocated to that school. In all cases, the cost of restarting the school was higher than the allocation; thus, the district and ESE needed to find ways to cover that cost. Financing each of these externally managed schools required attention to start-up, first-year costs with an eye toward creating a sustainable model. Initial start-up costs came from the regular school budget and were supplemented by School Redesign Grants.¹² In addition, charter operators' charter networks frequently contributed some funding to support the schools' start-ups. Indeed, some charter operators reported that "realistically, you have to have some of your own money and assume that you're going to have to spend it."

Staffing

Charter operators identified control over staffing of the district-run schools to be a "nonnegotiable." The district receiver granted the partners this authority with the requisite that all the new and current teachers be part of the teachers union, the Lawrence Teachers Union. School leaders were hired by the charter operators and typically came from within their charter school networks. For example, Unlocking Potential (UP) Educational Network has its own leadership training program, and school leaders at the two UP Academy schools were selected from this program.

The district administrators and charter operators reported that integration of their staff hiring and staffing patterns went smoothly. Initially, some staff positions did not clearly align to the district staff titles and positions, but the district worked with the charter operators to accommodate this need. For at least one of the charter operators, there were differences between the pay scale of the Lawrence school and that of the charter schools because the district pay scale was slightly higher. In the end, this difference in pay helped the charter operators to recruit some of the staff from their current schools. Charter operators reported no issues with the teachers union. One charter operator stated, "We've never worked with the [teachers] union before, and that has not been a problem."

Teachers. Teacher recruitment and hiring occurred very quickly; thus, recruitment focused on the district-run school and the charter operators' existing networks. Many of the charter operators indicated that they had the opportunity and tried to recruit some of the staff who had been teaching in the school prior to the transfer to the charter operator. In nearly all cases, however, these teachers did not apply or choose to be part of the charter operator's school in the first year of start-up.¹³ One charter operator speculated:

I think that by the time these [Level 4] schools get to the point where someone else is going to come in and manage, [the staff] are just tired. You know, they've been through all the hurdles of trying new things and new leaders, and the teachers just need a change.

The teachers at each of the charter operator schools were hired by the charter operators through their charter networks and other recruitment strategies. The partners recognized that having a brand new

¹² School Redesign Grants are federal funding for low-performing schools offered through a competitive process. The funds are from Title I, 1003(g) School Improvement Grants.

¹³ It is worth noting that in subsequent years, the external operator had some success in recruiting teachers in the middle schools that were phasing in oversight of the school by grade level.

staff required a substantial investment in culture and capacity building. To mitigate this challenge, many of the charter operators recruited or borrowed teachers from their charter schools. This ensured that at least some staff were familiar with the school model and served as a support to the teachers who were new to the school and to the partner's school model.

Staff Training. Teachers and staff participated in substantial training prior to the start of school and throughout the school years. The advantage that each of the external providers offers is an opportunity to draw upon the infrastructure to build capacity within the charter schools. Being familiar with school start-up and having honed the staff training process through prior charter school operations experience, the charter operators knew what they needed to accomplish, and they had the resources and strategy to provide it.

Community Connections. Generally, leaders and teachers were new to the school and often to the district, but some charter operators hired individuals, such as paraprofessionals, who live in the community as a purposeful strategy. Nearly all the charter operators recognized the challenge of managing an existing school and believed that one way to soften this transition for students and the community was to ensure that there was a connection, through staff, to the community.

Community Outreach

As soon as the charter operators were in place, each quickly began to develop and implement a comprehensive communications plan with the neighborhood community they served. According to district and external provider respondents, the turnaround strategy was met with limited community resistance. Charter operators speculated that in the face of the district being placed in state receivership, community members and families were not surprised by the change and were pleased to know what the change meant for their children. The receiver offered a possible reason for this viewpoint: "At the end of the day, parents don't care, right?... They just want a good school for their kids." Indeed, Lawrence already has high-performing charter schools with a wait-list of families trying to get their children into these schools.

One minor challenge or new experience for the charter operators was the way in which students are enrolled in the school. In the LPS district, students attend neighborhood schools, meaning students are assigned to schools that are geographically close to where they live. For the charter operators, this arrangement posed a great opportunity as well as new challenges. Such assignment marks a difference from charter schools' student enrollment lottery system, which typically comes with automatic buy-in from families who have selected to enroll in the lottery. Without the assumption of automatic buy-in, charter operators adapted their models to increase the time and effort involved in building the community's awareness of the school model and expectations.

Still, the district and charter operators described the experience as positive. The fact that the schools were serving specific neighborhoods made the communication efforts easier and more targeted (because of the geographic boundaries of focus). Although operators reported that the short time frame inhibited them from engaging in the extent of outreach efforts that they would have typically employed, each was still actively engaged in this effort. Operators discussed plans to enhance their communication efforts in subsequent years.

Stage 3. Implementation

Despite a very short time frame, each of the charter operators reported that its schools were up and running by the beginning of the school year. Although some of the initial uncertainty felt during the recruitment and start-up phases had dissipated, there were still questions in the minds of many of the external providers. For example, implementation served as an opportunity to test whether the autonomies that the district receiver promised would be a reality and whether the school models, developed under the assumption of charter school autonomies, would function well in a district-run school. Respondents reported that implementation brought about issues related to school model adaptations, interdistrict relationships, and ongoing district support. Each of these issues is discussed in detail.

Model Adaptation

One of the big questions for the charter operators and the district alike was whether the partners' existing models would work in the district-run schools. Indeed, all parties recognized the concern and were open to accommodating and adapting the model to ensure that the students in the schools were served. As one respondent remarked:

[The charter operators must] be able to realize when that charter model is going to work and when they are going to need to innovate and differentiate it for the kids that are in front of them, which could be very different than the kids in the charter school.¹⁴

It is worth noting that the district context and student enrollment or school assignment policies drove many of the adaptations to the model.

Charter operators reported that their models allowed for innovation and, thus, in most cases, they were able to adapt. The charter operators who phased in by grade levels believed that this strategy was important for them to learn and adapt over a period of school years. One external provider discussed the approach, which allows for adaptation:

We're having to be creative and innovative about applying aspects of our model and developing new ones. And, I think if we [the charter operators] can get it right and really... I mean, there are some things that we know are working so well and we're very proud of, but... we're still looking at data. We want to make sure that we have it right.

Another charter operator explained:

I would say... identify what the key priorities are, be really concrete about those and really make sure that you identify... one or two priorities that you want to take on as a school in your first year or your second year,... if we take these on and we take just these two or three core priorities on, we can do those well, and we can do those very well as opposed to...all of these things need to get done and having too many priorities, and then none of them get done well.

According to respondents, the greatest challenge to implementing their model was the array of student needs. Although external operators prepared for all levels of student need, there were some instances

¹⁴ The difference in the needs of students were because of the student enrollment and school assignment policies in the district as well as the newness of some of the charter operators to the Lawrence community.

in which additional resources were needed from the district. For example, in one of the charter-managed schools, the model's student behavioral plan worked for nearly all the students; however, there were a few students who needed additional support and intervention, and the headmaster was in the process of adjusting the model to accommodate these students' needs. One charter operator described the accommodation for a small population of students: "[A small group] of youngsters out of the [whole school] really need a therapeutic model, so we've had to develop some resources to really help them." Although all operators identified this challenge, it was particularly salient for the Phoenix Academy Lawrence. For example, the charter-managed high school, though designed to accommodate a range of student needs, found that a majority of the students being referred to the school had significant and severe behavior, social, and emotional needs as opposed to a range of needs.¹⁵ The charter operator quickly adapted programs to accommodate this need and worked with the district to add staff to support efforts at the school.

Student Mobility. Student mobility posed another challenge to charter operators. Operators reported student turnover as high as 28 percent, with students entering the school midyear. As a district leader explained:

Kids kind of really come in and out all the time [as a result of immigration]. And I think one of [charter operators'] really big strengths in their charter school is they were able to have the kids from Pre-K to 8, and they built this, like, amazing culture in the school that was built on the premise of the fact that the kids stay with you and don't leave.

While charter school operators have some experience with student mobility, the nature of the lottery system and families opting into the school is very different from neighborhood school assignment policies in the district. In most instances, the charter operator-managed schools are located in the poorest sections of the community where families tend to move around or out to other neighborhoods. The high levels of mobility and the influx of new students throughout the school year posed a challenge to implementing their models, which typically dedicate significant amounts of time and resources to building the school culture.

The charter operators have models that center on building a culture throughout the school, and in many cases, partners dedicate significant time during the beginning of the school year toward building this culture. This model works for charter operators because there are limitations on when a charter school must accept students, and charter schools often do not accept students after the first quarter. Student transients in the district-run schools required that the charter operators adapt their models to accommodate the building of culture for these mobile students. In some cases, charter operators developed orientation systems to transition students into the school. One charter operator noted:

The challenge for teachers is that they have ten new [students] come into a class, you know, or into a grade a year and, then, how do you carve out the differentiation that

¹⁵ The Phoenix Academy Lawrence differs from the other charter operator-managed district schools in that it started as a new school, and it is driven by the mission that the traditional high school education does not fit the needs or interests of all students. Thus, the school seeks to serve these students through its charter model; however, in Lawrence the school was regarded as a place to refer students who had the most extreme social and behavioral needs and who were not able to function in the high school. The Phoenix Academy Lawrence operator welcomed these students, but its model is also built on having students with lower level needs who are seeking an alternative to the traditional high school setting.

those youngsters need for support and for their learning from others, who [have been in the school].

Some charter operators reported providing more intensive support for teachers in differentiation of instruction and other strategies for improving students' transition into the school throughout the school year.

On the whole, providers reported that the core elements of their models were intact. Both adaptations and innovations on the part of the charter operators and district support helped to fill in the gaps in student needs.

Interdistrict Relationships

Relationships between the charter operators and other schools and staff in the district proved to be a new and unanticipated challenge for the charter operators. Accustomed to operating charter schools not connected to district schools, the charter operators needed to be attentive to in-district communications. Both the phase-in strategy and the new high school faced challenges.

The phase-in strategy used by the charter-operator middle schools required that each charter operator share a building with the other grade levels in the school that the partner would eventually take over. The charter operator began managing only the sixth-grade class in the first year, with plans to expand to the full middle school. One charter operator explained that, though the unique situation required some additional time and navigation because the operators technically were sharing the building with another school, the phase-in process made the takeover more manageable given the short timeline for start-up:

In our first year, there were four different programs operating within the same building, and we were on the same floor as the seventh and eighth graders who were part of the [original school] and in the upcoming year would become [incorporated into the externally managed school].... We interacted very closely with the school leaders to ensure that the operations of our schools didn't disrupt each other's.

For the charter operator overseeing the high school, miscommunication about the intent of the new school with other staff in the district schools impacted the partner's ability to fully implement the school model. The Phoenix Academy Lawrence offers an alternative high school approach, specifically targeted at students who may benefit from a different learning environment. As the partner states, "We have a freer and more open way of serving kids." Inside the district, however, school personnel understood this objective to mean that the school "was just a place to assign kids who have failed in the district system." Students were referred to that school based on an inaccurate understanding of the school's intent or model. The charter operator explained that the high school model is designed to serve a mix of two types of students: (1) kids who fail in the "district system," and (2) students who are interested in a different pathway or approach to completing high school. The over enrollment of students who were not successful in the district system required the charter operator to adapt the school model, thus deviating from its mission. Many of the students enrolled in the school came with significant social and emotional needs, and thus required more intense supports. Without the enrollment of both types of students, it was difficult to implement the school model as it was envisioned. This misinterpretation has required that the charter operator work with the high school principal and district staff to clarify and communicate in a way that changes the predominant perception that the school is an "alternative school for bad kids." Since that time, the district and the charter operator have collaborated to improve

the process for referring students to the school, and for identifying ways for the high school to improve services to students.

Ongoing District Support and Cross-Pollination

The district provides ongoing support for implementation using two mechanisms: (1) as-needed, customized support to its schools, the centerpiece of the district’s portfolio or open architecture approach, and (2) group convenings of individuals in similar roles (e.g., principals, specialists, and so forth) to discuss common needs as a means of integrating the charter operators into the district.

Customized Support. The district’s customized support is particularly important for the charter operators who are new to the concept of running a district school. The district designated the chief redesign officer to work directly with the charter operators. According to the charter operators, the district-dedicated liaison is on call for any issues that the external operators face. A charter operator explained:

[The district liaisons] grease the wheels for us, you know, if we have a particular problem or issue. We don’t have to get in line and stand behind six layers of bureaucracy. [The district liaisons] are very supportive, very sensitive to our requests.

Over time, the needs of the charter operators have lessened; however, problems still arise, and the district meets with external operators, including charter operators, one-on-one and in groups as needed.

District support is offered as needed, and charter operators indicated that they have opportunities for one-on-one support as well as meetings with other charter operators and with other school leaders. The district–charter operator relationships differ depending on the particular needs of the school and the charter operator, underscoring the agility required of the district to adapt to the models and expectations of each partner. One charter operator described the district support:

On an operational level, I’d say there’s a lot of communication back and forth, but also, you know, just in terms of goal setting. They [district leaders] work directly with my principal and they set goals, and they come in and evaluate.

Group Convenings. In addition to providing targeted support, the district convenes the charter operators and other school leaders and staff (e.g., English language learner [ELL] specialists) regularly as a means of integrating the charter operators into the districts. According to district leaders, the aim of convening is to identify common challenges and share strategies to solve these problems. Beyond the primary purpose of the principal meetings and other convenings, such engagements provide opportunities for the charter operators to build relationships and understand the community. As one state leader explained:

The better an operator understands the community, the more successful they’re going to be.... The idea that we could plunk somebody in who isn’t associated, and familiar, and welcome, I think it’s just more of an uphill battle. And I think that, you know, respect can be won, but it can really be a long process.

For the charter operators, the district convenings provided opportunities to learn about and understand district processes and to share practices with peers who are struggling with similar concerns. As a result of these meetings, there has been “a lot of cross-pollination” among charter operators and other school leaders, according to one district leader. The aim of the convenings, according to the district receiver, is to “let these things happen... organically” with the idea that:

[Once] people [charter operators and other school leaders] get in the same room,... they realize that they have similar jobs. They have... similar approximations of kids. They're like, "Hey, what's working for you there? Let me tell you what's working for me here or what's not working. How do you deal with that?"

Since charter operators and district leaders began to use this strategy, there have been many instances in which some schools have decided to do things together or learn about the enrichment opportunities in another district school. For example, one charter operator linked up with a district school that had created and effectively implemented curricula and programs designed specifically for the student population in Lawrence. Seeking to adapt its model to the needs of ELLs, a network team partnered with a district school leader for "consultation about their [the district's] curriculum and pedagogy, their structure of classes for these newcomers, in return for which we are helping them with some benchmark testing."

Generally, the charter operators are doing an equal amount of learning and sharing during these meetings. One charter operator explained the convenings: "When we see each other at the principals' meetings, it's always one of those, like, 'Oh, I've got to get over to your school' or 'We've got to get together.'" District leaders and charter operators reported that the district's role has begun to catalyze a stronger community of practice among all school leaders. Furthermore, the district convenings helped to create cohesion among charter operators and other school leaders and to eliminate tension between the two groups.

Considerations and Discussion

The emerging successes of the district receiver and the charter operators' schools contribute to a growing interest in this strategy. Providing intensive support to a low-performing school by assigning a charter operator to manage the school as a strategy requires policymakers, state education agency officials, district leaders, and charter operators to carefully consider the conditions that are in place. There is undoubtedly a level of risk that each of the key stakeholders must assume, and the LPS district case provides some insight into a few key considerations.

Stage 1. Recruitment

Finding experienced external providers is a challenge and may require state efforts to plan and train individuals and organizations to support this type of turnaround strategy. In addition, gathering information on what works and what does not work when external operators are engaged in the turnaround of schools is needed. One state official commented on the challenge: "There's not a large universe of folks who meet the criteria" to be an external operator. So, the combination of challenges in recruiting charter management organizations to serve as operators continues because of the reluctance of the field to take on the risk and because of a limited field of qualified candidates. One option is to expand the types of potential operators. In Lawrence, the American Federation of Teachers runs the Oliver Partnership School. Still, the charter school management organizations tend to have the most depth of experience and can demonstrate a track record of success; thus, they are the obvious place to concentrate recruiting efforts. State policymakers and leaders have a role to play in improving the capacity of potential external partners through training opportunities and by gathering information about what is needed to ensure that external operators are successful. At this time, a number of districts, including Springfield and Boston, are engaging external operators in the management of their lowest performing schools. Understanding how these efforts work in Lawrence as well as in other districts across the state is critical to improving the practice.

The lack of incentives for engaging in this work needs to be addressed. Incentives, such as longer contract periods, guaranteed autonomy over key aspects of the work, resources including funding for start-up or takeover, and support with outreach to the communities in which these schools reside, are all examples of possible incentives for encouraging charter operators to engage in the management of district schools. State officials and district administrators agreed that a critical incentive, beyond the foundation of law and regulations that support this type of partnership, is a demonstrated willingness of leaders and partners to use the autonomies granted by these laws. As one state official noted, "[Charter school management organizations or operators] who are paying attention to what's happening around the state are aware that this is a state that's established the conditions through law and regulation." But, more important, the state supports and (according to the ESE commissioner) is "willing to employ" the law and regulations, making externally managed, district-run schools a possibility. In addition, there are currently no financial incentives for external operators to agree to operate district-run schools. Although the goal is for these schools to operate within the confines of the district-allocated school budget, respondents indicated a need for funding for start-up in at least the first year, if not the first three years.

Adequate lead time and the timely development of a firm turnaround plan will bolster improvement efforts; however, in Lawrence much of the time was spent negotiating between the receiver and the external operators, thus further limiting the time for planning turnaround of the operators' schools.

One of the biggest challenges to the external operator strategy was time. All the key stakeholders reported that time was a major issue at each stage (recruitment, start-up, and implementation) of the process. Although limited time is an issue with any school turnaround effort, certain factors can limit the pressure of time. First, state education agencies and district leaders can begin the recruitment process before they need to implement the strategy. Having a list of qualified and vetted external operators may help in targeting efforts. Second, state and district leaders can begin to pave the path for completing MOUs with their legal departments or could seek formal legislation to streamline this process. Finally, state and district leaders can begin to develop relationships with external operators because, according to all respondents, trust and understanding are key to the strategy.

Recognize that decisions made about staffing (in particular, the teachers) in the external operator–managed schools will impact staffing not only in these schools but also in all other schools in the district. In Lawrence, nearly all the staff in each of the charter operator schools were replaced because the current staff, although welcomed, did not apply for jobs at the school. This means that charter operators need to be prepared to recruit the staff, often for the whole school, in a short period of time. According to the charter operators, recruitment and hiring began in the spring and continued through the summer. The challenge, according to charter operators, was that this was one of several major activities (e.g., facility preparation, materials purchasing, training, community outreach) on which they needed to focus.

The staffing issues have implications for the district as well. The district, as a result of collectively bargained agreements, may need to place the teachers who are displaced by the turnover of schools to external partners. According to the receiver, in Lawrence the typical staff turnover of about 25 percent annually, along with the district’s progressive evaluation policies focused on removing teachers who were not performing optimally, allowed the district to place teachers from these school and prevent the loss of good teachers who chose not to work at the external operator schools.

Stage 2. Start-Up

Start small and maintain a mixed portfolio of schools in the district. In contrast to other initiatives (e.g., New Orleans), the district’s turnaround efforts focused on a mixed portfolio of schools. Referring to staffing and other operations issues, one district leader noted, “If this had been the whole district strategy, we would have run into problems.” Limiting the external operator presence to a portion of the district allowed the district officials to provide adequate support to the external operators and maintain some stability in the district.

Beyond the state conditions or political will supporting the external operator strategy, the district leadership needs to be prepared to defend the autonomies offered to the externally operated schools and to support the external operators, especially those that are charter operators (and new to the district system). For example, the superintendent (or, as in the case of Lawrence, the receiver) needs to “embrace an outside operator as a partner in the work” and goes on to note that “this isn’t always happening,” according to a state official. In addition, the district needs to balance the freedom to make decisions and implement the school model with the need to control and manage the school. Many respondents indicated that maintaining this balance is a challenge. A state official summed up the delicate balance:

[The district needs to] give the [charter operator] space to exercise the expertise that the [charter operator] brings and not try to micromanage,... but also be smart about what expertise and capacity the [charter operator] is not bringing to the table, so that

the district can supplement what the [charter operator] doesn't bring." It has to be clear that "the [charter operator] is here on behalf of the district and not in spite of the district.

As external operators, charter school management organizations bring a substantial level of capacity and infrastructure in terms of human resources (recruitment and hiring), staff development, student information systems, and the like, which can be an advantage to a new start-up school. As one charter operator serving as an external operator explained:

We have a strong back-office, central office team that has provided finance, human resources, development, accounting, IT, over the years. So, while we had to add to that capacity [to serve the district-run school], we didn't have to create it.

This infrastructure supported the rapid timeline that the charter operators followed to be ready for students on the first day of school.

Stage 3. Implementation

In many ways, the decades of charter school operation in states have laid the groundwork for this type of approach; however, without clear legislation authorizing the external operator model, charter operators face significant risk in terms of longevity and the possibility that the district school setting may require that the operators compromise aspects of their models. The most experienced charter operators are likely better poised to make adjustments to their models. The charter operators engaged in Lawrence's school turnaround efforts have substantial experience and a proven track record of success. These two factors are critical because this experience supported charter operators' confidence in how they need to adapt their models to the specific needs of their students. In fact, the charter operators all expressed their commitment and willingness to adapt their school models to the autonomous, district-run school setting.

Of particular interest, the external operator approach is one strategy that allows the state to realize its promise to use charter schools as an opportunity or laboratory for improving public education as a whole. In Lawrence, bringing external operators and traditional school principals together with district school principals creates opportunities for cross-pollination. District administrators and charter operators serving as external operators reported that participating in the district's principal meetings provides opportunities to connect with peers and learn from one another. Although the cross-school relationships are developing, there are examples of principals sharing practices and learning from one another. For example, one of the external operator schools asked to observe, and to receive support with, targeted interventions for ELLs. In another example, one of the district school principals adopted a program for engaging parents and the community from an externally managed school.

The example and potential of engaging external operators to provide intensive support of low-performing schools has begun to spread beyond the Lawrence state receivership, and it has resulted in emerging innovative approaches for supporting low-performing schools spurred by districts (not state receivers). District-run, externally managed schools are one option being exercised in districts that are not under state receivership. For example, in Boston Public Schools and Springfield Public Schools, the districts are exercising the option to provide intensive support to consistently struggling schools by assigning an external operator. In Boston, the Dearborn School will be managed by an external operator, and in Springfield, several struggling middle schools will be grouped into an empowerment zone run by

an external operator. In both cases, the districts are opting to provide intensive support that the districts do not have the capacity to offer.

Implications and Conclusion

The external operator-managed schools implemented in the LPS district attempts to address two vexing challenges of public education: (1) how does a district (or state) provide the level of support needed by its lowest performing schools without compromising the quality of support to all of its schools, given its constrained resources? and (2) how can districts (or states) engage charter operators and district school leaders in an active, professional discussion to share ideas and promising practices with the goal of improving the education system as a whole? There is much to learn (and continue to learn) from the case of the LPS district's use of external operators to manage the lowest performing schools.

The most immediate lessons from this study suggest that if this is a strategy that Massachusetts' districts and the state education agency want to continue to pursue, then:

- State leaders and policymakers have a role in improving the specificity of the external operator model through legislation and regulation. Specifically laying out expectations for contract periods or the potential for contractual periods as well as governance structures would immediately alleviate the issue of limited time faced by the Lawrence receiver and the external operators. In addition, explicitly codifying autonomies of the external operators may diminish some of the perceived risk that charter operators reported with regard to the Lawrence strategy.
- State leaders and policymakers need to improve the number and the readiness of external operators and districts to engage in this type of relationship. Providing training to external operators (and potentially to district leaders) is necessary.
- State leaders need to invest in understanding implementation and impact of this type of external operator strategy. It is clear that this is a new approach, and thus needs and training will evolve. Thus, there is a need to continue to conduct research to inform future policy and support strategies for the external operator school turnaround strategy.
- State leaders and policymakers need to develop a program of incentives. Although the previous suggestions will decrease the disincentives for external operators (and, particularly, charter operators) to engage in the strategy, more is needed. Challenges cited by the charter operators include the school year start-up costs, preparing the facility, training a whole new staff, and community outreach. In at least some instances, charter operators reported that some of these costs were covered by their charter management organization; these efforts are central to their model's success in the charter school setting.

Although there are many potential challenges in implementing an intensive support model through the assignment of external operators to manage district schools, the LPS district has realized some benefits. It is clear that to make this model work, state and district leaders need to be willing to invest substantial time, political will, and commitment to realize any long-term benefits. In the short term, this model will undoubtedly be accompanied by challenges and adversity, but the more the district and state systems are designed to respond to "bumps in the road," the more likely the strategy is to be a success.

For charter school operators who are considering the role of an external operator who oversees a district-run school, the risks are great. Charter operators with established models and substantial experience ensure that the external operator has the confidence, resources, and wherewithal to

respond to challenges throughout the process. In addition, the relationship between the external operator and the district is central to the positive experience that external operators described in Lawrence. This relationship is built on agreement in the vision and philosophy between the partners and the district as well as a commitment to provide the space and time for the external operators' schools to be successful.

Finally, although Lawrence has realized some immediate improvements, all parties agree that there is room for greater improvement. For this reason, maintaining the course and monitoring the progress are critical. States and districts, along with their external operators, need to be prepared to reap the rewards of improved schools and to adapt or make the hard decisions of changing course when the effort is not successful. All parties need to keep in mind that the ultimate goal of this strategy is to improve educational outcomes for students. A district leader summed up this sentiment: "You're not doing this because you want to show that you've got some power. It has to be about the kids."

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