

The Role of Charter Restarts in School Reform

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Executive Summary

Charter school boards enter into a critical bargain: autonomy for accountability. Compared with their traditional district counterparts, they operate with relative freedom in curriculum, hiring, budgeting, and other operational decisions. In exchange, they are held accountable for student performance in ways that traditional district schools are not: If they fail to meet the expectations set in their charter, they may be closed.

But closing a school—which dissolves the charter and charter organization, liquidates its assets, and requires that students reenroll elsewhere—can be a difficult choice, especially when the students have few or no high-quality school options available.¹ Then, closing the charter means sending students to schools that may be only marginally better, or sometimes even worse.² The sector needs a pathway to create high-quality seats for these students while still holding the adults in the building accountable for low performance.

This report explores a variation on school closure—charter school “restarts.” Charter school restarts represent a relatively new strategy for intervening in charter schools when performance does not meet expectations—not just as a last-ditch effort to avoid closure, but as a proactive strategy that responsible boards and authorizers can initiate when the conditions are right. In a charter school restart, the school’s operator *and* governance (board) changes, while the school continues to serve the same students.

Part 1. Accountability through Restart

For this report, we define “charter school restarts” through three fundamental characteristics: a change in school operator and a change in school governance, while continuing to serve the same students.³

Restarts differ from internal turnaround attempts by changing both the school operator *and* school governance (see Figure A). By a change in school operator, we mean that a new, *high-quality* organization operates the school. By a change in governance, we mean a newly formed board, whose members are strategically selected by the new operator to provide a range of skills, experiences, and local community leadership that promotes effective, independent school governance. Restarts also differ from instances in which a charter school is *closed* and a new-start charter opens in its place, because restarts automatically reenroll and continue to serve the same students at the school.⁴

Figure A. Options for Addressing Underperformance at a Charter School

	Internal Turnaround Attempt	Closure	Closure (with New Start)	Restart
Operator Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New operator may be hired Some or all staff replaced, including principal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New operator New staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New operator Replaces some or all staff, including principal
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New board
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No change

The Potential Benefits of Charter School Restarts

A charter school restart offers several benefits that may make it preferable to closing a school when there are few or no other high-quality options for students. Charter restarts can:

- Provide a high-quality school option for *all* children attending the charter school
- Shift the overall quality of the charter sector by replacing low-quality seats with high-quality seats
- Honor the commitment charter schools make to public school accountability
- Minimize disruption to students and families attending the charter
- Minimize disruption to surrounding schools
- Provide an opportunity for successful operators to replicate their success

The Right Conditions for Restarts

Restarts have the potential to serve well students who have been underserved for years. To succeed, however, certain conditions must be present. Experience suggests that restarts are most likely to succeed if:

- A supply exists or can be built of operators who show high potential for success and openness to leading restarts, rather than just creating new schools
- The charter authorizer has the legal authority, willingness, and capacity to oversee the restart
- The school board initiating the restart is committed to facilitating and supporting the restart
- The new operator can leverage existing school assets
- Stakeholders support the restart and share a commitment to student outcomes

Restart as a Proactive, Board-Initiated Strategy

Ideally, a school board would recognize that it is not equipped to dramatically improve the school, and move forward with restart plans before charter revocation ever comes up for discussion. These board-initiated restarts have the potential to give students access to better educational outcomes more quickly than an authorizer-initiated restart, in which the authorizer determines that the school will have to either close or restart without input from the current board or operator. They also create a better dynamic for the transition by avoiding the stigma associated with the threat of closure, and they offer existing board members another opportunity to serve their students well—this time by stepping down so that better-qualified replacements can step up.

Part 2. Key Elements of Five Charter School Restarts

We profiled five schools that met our definition of a charter restart—Henry Ford Academy: Power House High in Chicago; Harriet Tubman in New Orleans; Paul Robeson in Trenton, NJ; Harlem Day in New York; and Hardy Williams in Philadelphia. These examples draw on more than a dozen interviews with current and former charter operators, board members, and authorizers. Although these efforts are too new to use student achievement to evaluate their long-term success, they provide crucial insights for charter boards and authorizers about the challenges and lessons learned in the restart process.

Part 3. Recommendations

A charter restart provides an opportunity for charter school boards to effectively and proactively address poor academic performance well before charter renewal and closure become an issue. Relatively few charter schools have restarted, and the cases we studied represent early efforts at a strategy still very much in development. These early efforts, however, highlight a number of successes, as well as challenges, from which we have developed recommendations to make charter school restart

an effective and replicable strategy when the conditions described above make it a preferable alternative to school closure. The recommendations focus specifically on the role of two key actors—the existing board and the authorizer.

The Role of the Existing School Board

1. **Incorporate restart strategy into school improvement planning options** by rigorously evaluating school performance on an ongoing basis, considering restart as a potential strategy, and keeping students' interests first.
2. **Augment the board's capacity for restart** by assessing its strengths and weaknesses and engaging external partners to fill any talent gaps.
3. **Champion the restart publicly to build support for it in the community** by endorsing the restart and working with the new operator to engage and recruit families.

The Role of the Authorizer

1. **Encourage boards of struggling schools to consider restart as part of school improvement planning** by emphasizing the board's public obligation, by discussing restart as a viable and welcomed alternative to incremental change or closure, and by setting clear performance criteria.
2. **Establish a transparent and rigorous process to evaluate and approve restart plans**, including both the authorizer's evaluation and approval criteria for the restart plan and the qualifications upon which operators and new board members will be evaluated.
3. **Establish and oversee a clear and comprehensive process for implementing the restart plan once approved**, including a timeline for key activities and the role each major actor will play.

Conclusion

Charter restarts hold compelling promise for providing students with a high-quality educational option when their current charter school does not, and surrounding schools offer nothing better. When the conditions are right, a new school operator and board can dramatically improve academic outcomes. And when charter school boards are able to reflect on their struggles and proactively pursue a restart strategy, students get the opportunity to improve even more quickly.



Introduction. The Role of Charter Restarts in School Reform

Charter schools are free public schools governed by independent nonprofit boards. They offer parents a choice of public schools, provide educators with an opportunity to innovate and serve different student populations in a mission-focused environment, and introduce competitive pressure on nearby district schools with which they vie for students. Above all, the original point of charter schools was to provide greater autonomy in exchange for strict accountability in meeting student performance goals.

Numerous charter schools have changed the life trajectory of their students, many of whom come from low-income households.⁵ At their best, charter schools propel disadvantaged students to outperform their peers elsewhere in the district or state on standardized exams, often closing substantial learning gaps along the way.⁶ The most successful charters also graduate more poor and minority students than their traditional district counterparts, and they help those students earn college acceptance letters at rates that rival the highest-achieving schools in the country.⁷

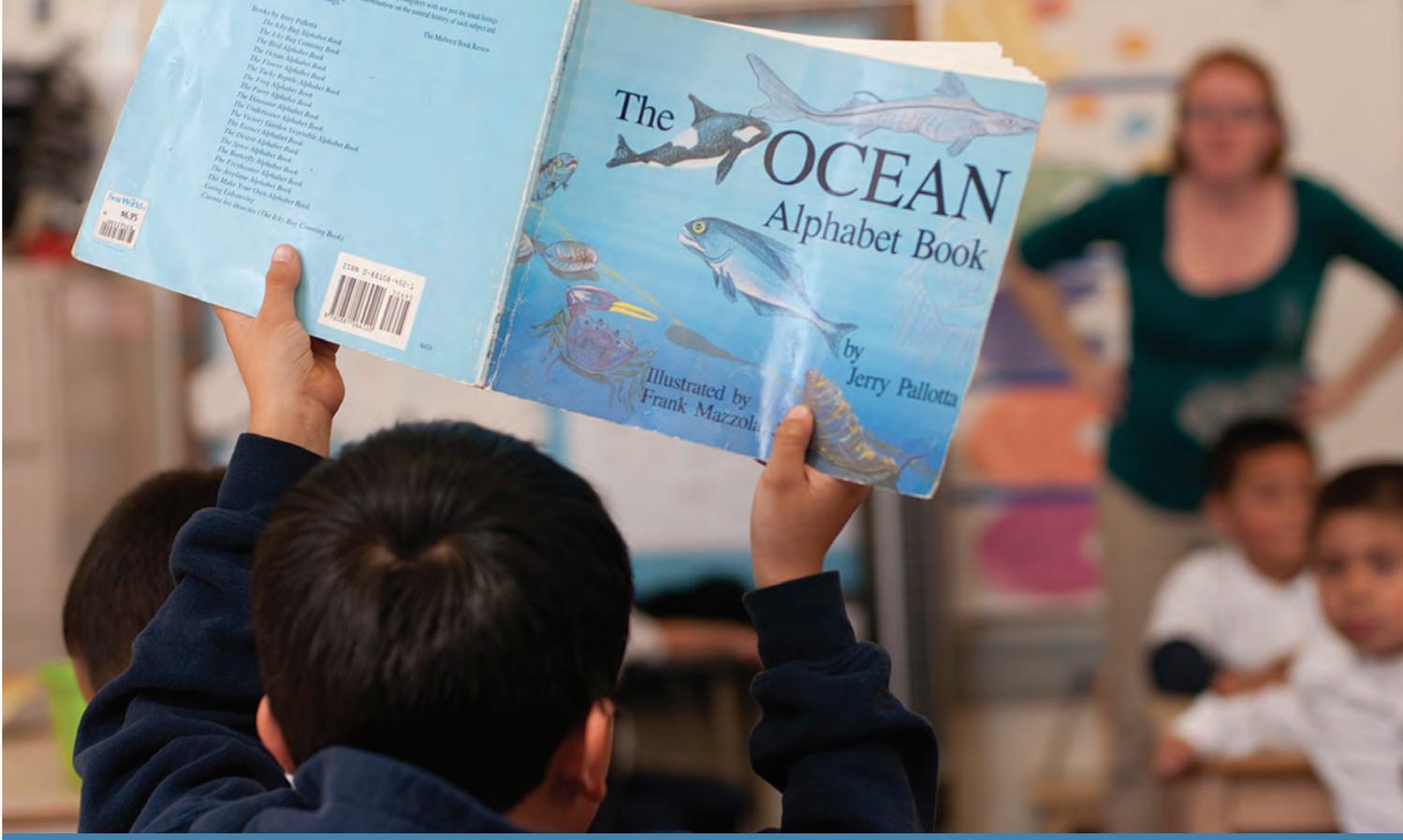
Yet charter schools do not always live up to their promise. A recent study of charter school performance in 16 states found that nearly 40 percent of charter schools achieved less academic growth than comparable traditional district schools.⁸ In these cases, strict accountability for results becomes particularly important. In the past, a board or authorizer would often attempt an internal “turnaround” by hiring a new principal, replacing staff, and/or trying to implement a new curriculum or program model when the charter school struggled. More often than not, however, these efforts also fall short.⁹ The charter bargain establishes a clear solution—close schools that are not effectively serving students academically.

But closing a school—which dissolves the charter and charter organization, liquidates its assets, and requires that students reenroll elsewhere—can be a difficult choice, especially when the students have few or no high-quality school options available.¹⁰ In this context, closing the charter school means sending students to schools that may be only marginally better, or sometimes even worse.¹¹ Because of these negative side effects, authorizers often balk at closing schools that are not meeting baseline expectations. The sector needs a pathway to create high-quality seats for these students and still hold the adults in the building accountable for low performance.

This report explores a variation on school closure—charter school “restarts.” These represent a relatively new strategy for intervening in charter schools when performance does not meet expectations, not just as a last-ditch effort to avoid closure, but as a proactive strategy that responsible boards and authorizers can initiate when the conditions are right. In a charter school restart, the school’s operator *and* governance (board) changes, while the school continues serving the same students.

This report has three parts:

- Part 1 takes a closer look at how restarts fit within the larger context of charter school quality and accountability, and when a restart might be a viable option for charter authorizers and boards to pursue.
- Part 2 describes how charter restarts have played out at five schools—Henry Ford Academy: Power House High in Chicago; Harriet Tubman in New Orleans; Paul Robeson in Trenton, NJ; Harlem Day in New York; and Hardy Williams in Philadelphia. These examples draw on more than a dozen interviews with current and former charter operators, board members, and authorizers to identify trends, decision points, and lessons learned.
- Part 3 offers recommendations for board members and charter authorizers interested in pursuing a restart strategy, drawing on lessons learned from the school profiles and discussions with leaders in the field.



Part 1. Charter School Quality and Accountability

Charter schools enter into a critical bargain: autonomy for performance accountability. Compared with their traditional district counterparts, they operate with relative freedom in curriculum, hiring, budgeting, and other operational decisions. In exchange, they are held accountable for student performance in ways that traditional district schools are not: If they fail to meet the expectations set in their charter, they may be closed.

Accountability Options Used by Most Authorizers

Traditionally, school boards and authorizers have been left with just two options when faced with a charter school that fails to meet the expectations laid out in its charter: engaging in an internal turnaround or closing the school. Sometimes these are the right options, but too often neither provides students with a high-quality education. Below we describe them in more detail, and under what circumstances they often fall short.

Internal Turnaround Attempt

We define an internal school turnaround attempt as any effort taken by a charter school board or directed by an authorizer to dramatically improve student performance in a short time without changing the governing body.¹² Using this definition, an internal school turnaround can take many forms, but generally includes a new school principal with an entirely or largely new staff. But the same governing body continues to hold the charter.

Unfortunately, internal turnaround attempts frequently fail.¹³ Research suggests that successful turnarounds require highly competent leaders who take a vigorous set of often controversial actions, with strong backing from their supervisors.¹⁴ Cross-sector research also shows that outside of education, in organizations including for-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies, major change efforts succeed only about 30 percent of the time.¹⁵

Evidence suggests that turnarounds of low-performing schools are no more successful. One study showed that fewer than 1 percent of low-performing charter schools made dramatic improvements in a five-year period, and fewer than 10 percent made even moderate improvement.¹⁶ Research has not looked at the reasons that charter schools in particular have struggled to turn around, but the same barriers that organizations in other sectors face likely apply to charters as well. School leaders who are truly visionary, have the know-how to implement much-needed systems and structures, are capable of developing a strong, focused reform plan, and can lead a turnaround campaign are incredibly rare.¹⁷ At the same time, school boards of low-performing schools are generally low-performing themselves, rarely having the will or ability to become an effective governing body with the capacity to identify, recruit, and support an effective school team.

School Closure

School closure involves dissolving the charter and charter organization, liquidating its assets, and having students reenroll elsewhere. Even when a new school (a “new start”) opens in the original facility, it is not connected to the original school and has no obligation to enroll the same students or legal structure to facilitate their enrollment, distinguishing it from a restart.

School closure ensures that no charter may fail children year after year, safeguarding both students and parents. This strategy also supports a more successful charter sector by maintaining a quality bar and protecting public interests and assets.¹⁸ In effect, it prevents the all-too-typical regression to the mean that has plagued so many other school reform efforts as they go to scale.

But school closures can be cumbersome, protracted processes—time students cannot spare. And the experience can deeply unsettle a school community if the authorizer cannot effectively close a failing school, while creating uncertainty and disruption for students and families who must find another school, as well as for students in the schools that must absorb the influx of new students.¹⁹ Meanwhile, closure provides no guarantee that students will be able to attend higher-performing schools where they can obtain a better education.

Thus school closure decisions often face strong community opposition.²⁰ So while it may be the best option when high-quality seats are available to students, closing a school is less than ideal when those seats do not exist elsewhere. As a result, authorizers frequently take the path of least resistance and approve charter renewals for low-performing schools, with at most a set of usually ineffectual conditions or recommendations for improvement.

Accountability through Restart

Authorizers, communities, and school boards need another path to success beyond internal turnaround efforts and traditional school closure. Charter school restarts offer a variation on typical school closures by promoting high-quality educational options for students while honoring the charter’s commitment to public accountability.

For this report, we define “charter school restarts” through three fundamental characteristics: 1) a change in school operator and 2) a change in school governance, while 3) continuing to serve the same students.²¹ As the schools profiled later in this report demonstrate, there are many variations on how a restart might work given these three criteria. Since there are so few examples of schools meeting this paper’s definition of a restart, and even less student performance data to indicate what works, our definition casts a wide net to present options for implementing a restart, and for identifying challenges and key questions related to these options and the restart strategy more broadly at this early stage of its usage. As we note throughout the report, however, some in the sector believe that a true restart effort needs to meet more than just the three criteria we include.²²

Change in School Operator

Restarts differ from internal turnaround attempts by changing both the school operator *and* school governance (see Figure 1, page 7). By a change in school operator, we mean that a new, *high-quality* organization operates the school. It is not sufficient to change just the school principal, leadership team, or staff as often happens with an internal turnaround attempt. Our definition of a restart requires that an entirely new organization with a proven record of success operates the school. For more on who ought to choose the new school operator, see “Choosing a New School Operator” on page 7.

Figure 1. Options for Addressing Underperformance at a Charter School

	Internal Turnaround Attempt	Closure	Closure (with New Start)	Restart
Operator Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New operator may be hired Some or all staff replaced, including principal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New operator New staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New operator Replaces some or all staff, including principal
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New board
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No change

Change in School Governance

A change in governance refers to a newly formed board, whose members are strategically selected by the new operator to provide a range of skills, experiences, and local community leadership that promotes effective, independent school governance. The details of this process will play out differently among states and districts to reflect their charter school laws and authorizer policies, but the basic premise remains that the new operator must have the responsibility and authority to establish an effective governing body. Just as with a new charter school, however, the authorizer should approve the new board members. A change in school governance is an essential criterion for restart because it ensures that the new operator has complete autonomy over the school’s new direction and provides an opportunity for more effective school oversight. For more on what a new board might look like, see “Who Can Serve on a ‘New’ Board?” on page 8.

Serving the Same Students

Restarts also differ from instances when a charter school is closed and a new-start charter school opens in its place because restarts automatically reenroll and continue to serve the same students at the school. We define the “same students” as anyone who enrolled at the charter the previous year, and would be eligible to enroll again in the upcoming year. This definition does not include students who graduated from the charter school, or new students who might have enrolled for the first time. It also

Choosing a New School Operator

Who should choose the new school operator—the existing board of the low-performing school or the authorizer? Ultimately, the authorizer is responsible for approving or rejecting the restart plan. In some of the restart cases we studied, the authorizer chose the restart operator, but in others, the existing school board initiated and managed the selection process without engaging the authorizer.

Operators and authorizers tend to have strong opinions about which strategy is best. Some operators feel adamantly that the existing board should not play a role in selecting the new operator. They argue that the existing board has proved unable to select and oversee leadership at the failing school, and should not therefore take responsibility for selecting a new operator for the restart. Another challenge is that board members of a failing school may be inclined to choose an operator willing to maintain aspects of the original school, which could perpetuate the status quo and limit the possibility for true and dramatic reform.

Others, however, believe that conducting an RFP process and allowing the existing board to choose the new operator makes the school community more likely to accept and buy into the restart. It also provides an opportunity for the existing board to uphold its commitment to families to deliver a high-quality education to the students by selecting a strong operator.

Regardless of who selects the new operator, the same set of criteria ought to guide the selection process, including evidence of the operators’ past success (e.g., a history of students’ achievement and growth at the operator’s other schools), replicable systems and structures, a strong talent pipeline, sound fiscal management, and the overall strength of the restart plan presented.

Who Can Serve on a “New” Board?

Who should serve on a board newly constituted by the new operator? Some argue for replacing all board members, because anyone connected to the original school will be inclined to hold on to aspects of the school they built, thereby stymying change. Others contend that some outgoing board members of the low-performing school were and can continue to be effective members of a new board, offering important institutional knowledge, specific skills (e.g., legal or financial), and an important connection to the school community.

In either instance, the new operator must have the full support of the new board, and in turn must fully support all of its members. Where allowed by the charter law and authorizer policy, the operator should play an active role in recruiting or approving the board members. So if the operator wants to include an outgoing board member, it should be the operator’s choice based on an assessment of what will most benefit the school, rather than a condition the outgoing board places on the new operator. However, the authorizer should be responsible for approving the new charter board members, just as it does for a new charter school, requiring the operator to provide a strong rationale for each of the board members it selects.

leaves open the possibility that the restart could expand the student population served to include new grades, or eliminate grades as the school’s original students graduate.

The Potential Benefits of Charter School Restarts

Charter school restart offers several benefits that make it a viable alternative to a traditional school closure, in which students must find another school to attend, or an internal turnaround attempt. Charter restarts can:

- **Provide a high-quality school option for all children attending the charter school.** When a charter school closes and the students must reenroll elsewhere, they often have few, if any, high-quality options in the surrounding schools. In contrast, all of the students attending the low-performing charter can automatically reenroll at their current school once the new, higher-performing operator and board take over.
- **Shift the overall quality of the charter sector by replacing low-quality seats with high-quality seats.** While closing a low-performing charter school and sending students elsewhere eliminates low-quality seats, restart aims to create new, high-quality seats. These new high-quality seats don’t benefit just the school’s current students, but also future students and the charter sector as a whole.
- **Honor the commitment charter schools make to public school accountability.** The adults in charge, not the enrolled students, are at fault when a charter school is low performing. Ultimately, those adults must be held accountable. School closure accomplishes this goal by shutting the school down completely. But restart, by replacing the school operator and board, offers a variation on closure that provides students with a new opportunity for success.
- **Minimize disruption to students and families attending the charter.** Students attending the charter would have to find a new school if the charter school closed, likely separating them from many of their classmates and burdening families to identify and enroll in a new school that fits their children well.²³ In a restart, students and their families can choose to remain at the same school.
- **Minimize disruption to surrounding schools.** If a charter school closes, the surrounding schools absorb the charter’s students. In some instances, district schools and nearby charters do not have the capacity to easily integrate these students.

- **Provide an opportunity for successful operators to replicate their success.** Especially when a state or district limits the number of charters permitted, or the charter school being restarted has a facility or other valuable assets, the restart may provide an opportunity for a successful operator to overcome barriers that would otherwise slow or stop its replication, creating more high-quality seats for students in a community more quickly.

The Right Conditions for Restart

Restarts have the potential to serve well students who have been underserved for years. Experience suggests, however, that restarts are most likely to succeed if:

- **A supply exists or can be built of operators who show high potential for success and openness to leading restarts, rather than just creating new schools.** If not implemented successfully, a restart can introduce more disruption to students and families than other improvement options, rather than less. Therefore, the new operator and new school board must have a record of or high potential for success in the charter sector, a solid plan for supporting strong student achievement at the charter school, including strong and replicable systems and structures, and demonstrated capacity to implement that plan.²⁴
- **The charter authorizer has the legal authority, willingness, and capacity to oversee the restart.** As the entity ultimately responsible for charter school oversight, the authorizer must determine whether the restart plan is likely to succeed. By supporting the restart process, including establishing a process for the restart and identifying the conditions under which a restart is most appropriate, the authorizer can facilitate a successful transition.
- **The school board initiating the restart is committed to facilitating and supporting the restart.** Ideally, a charter school board would initiate a restart well before an authorizer threatens to close the school due to chronic low performance. In the case of a board-initiated restart, it is particularly important that the board effectively manage the process, which will likely require more time and different skills than the board's traditional role. Almost inevitably, the board will need an outside partner to oversee a restart.
- **The new operator can leverage existing school assets.** A restart benefits when existing assets, such as a desirable facility or a fund surplus that can be reinvested into the restart effort, are available. Conversely, if the low-performing school has significant liabilities, they can be a deterrent for a potential restart operator.
- **Stakeholders support the restart and share a commitment to student outcomes.** Ideally all of the stakeholders in the restart, including the existing operator (if any), the existing board, and the school community, in addition to the authorizer, new board, and new operator, support the restart and share a commitment to student outcomes since they have to work together through parts of the transition.

Restart as a Proactive, Board-Initiated Strategy

With few exceptions, authorizers initiate the process of closing a charter school, triggered by years of low student performance. Charter school restarts share a critical feature with school closures, requiring that the school operator and board members—the adults responsible for the school's low performance—leave the school. In this sense, restarts are a variation on closure.

But charter restarts are distinct from school closures in two important ways. First, they allow the school to remain open and continue to serve the same students, although under entirely new management that has a record of success. Second, they provide an opportunity for board members to proactively transfer responsibility for student learning in a way that continues to serve their students—only better.

There are many reasons why a charter school might fail. The school's leadership, structures and systems, teacher quality, management, and finances may all contribute to some extent. Ultimately, however, the school board is accountable for a charter school's performance. Ideally, a school board would recognize that it is not equipped to dramatically improve the school, and move forward with restart plans before charter revocation ever comes up for discussion. In many cases, boards



will need encouragement and support from their authorizer and outside partners to fully acknowledge their school's weaknesses and to consider a restart option as an alternative to more incremental improvement strategies or outright closure. These board-initiated restarts have the potential to give students access to better educational outcomes more quickly than an authorizer-initiated restart, in which the authorizer determines that the school will restart without input from the current board or operator, or than full school closure. They also create a better dynamic for the transition by avoiding the stigma associated with the threat of closure.

Of course, asking board members to voluntarily step down and hand over the school in which they have heavily invested time, energy, and resources is no small task. Some may even consider it unrealistic. But as many of the charter school founders and former board members we interviewed for this report told us, that decision becomes easier when students' interests come before adults' emotional and professional connections to the school.

Part 2. Key Elements of Five Charter School Restarts

In this section, we take a closer look at five charter schools that were restarted to address academic underperformance: Henry Ford Academy: Power House High in Chicago; Harriet Tubman in New Orleans; Paul Robeson in Trenton, NJ; Harlem Day in New York; and Hardy Williams in Philadelphia (see Figure 2). These sites rose to the top of a fairly limited set of restart experiences nationally due to their alignment with the three characteristics of a restart defined above. More detail on each of the restarts is available in boxes throughout this section.²⁵

This section draws on each restart experience to:

- Outline key characteristics of the restart: new operators, board governance, and student enrollment;
- Describe related elements of the restart: chartering authority, asset transfer/management, and staffing; and
- Describe key features of the transition process: who initiated the restart and key timing around communication efforts.

Figure 2. Overview of Restart Sites

	Power House High	Harriet Tubman	Paul Robeson	Harlem Day	Hardy Williams
Location	Chicago, IL	New Orleans, LA	Trenton, NJ	New York, NY	Philadelphia, PA
Date of restart	2012 – 13	2011 – 12	2012 – 13	2011 – 12	2011 – 12
Grades served, 2012 – 13	9 – 12*	K – 8	4 – 8	K – 5	K – 9 (was K – 8)
New operator	Noble Network	Crescent City Schools	Scholar Academies	Democracy Prep Public Schools	Mastery Charter Schools
Average pass rate year before restart**	Reading: 11% Math: 3%	Reading: 38% [†] Math: 32% [†]	Reading: 27% Math: 38%	Reading: 25% Math: 44%	Reading: 49% Math: 57%
Most recent average pass rate since restart**	n/a	Reading: 44% Math: 46%	n/a	Reading: 60% Math: 73%	Reading: 54% Math: 71%
Eligible students who reenrolled after the restart	~ 85%	~ 40%	~95%	~ 70%	~90%

* The restart at Henry Ford Academy: Power House High involves a three-year transition. During the transition, two schools will operate in the same building. Henry Ford Academy: Power House High will phase out, serving one grade less each year, while DRW Trading: College Prep will serve an additional grade each year. Beginning in 2015 – 16, DRW Trading: College Prep will be the “restarted” school, serving all students in the building.

**All performance results come from state department of education files. When available, the table uses state-reported schoolwide proficiency rates. Where schoolwide proficiency rates are not reported, Public Impact calculated the schoolwide rates, weighting for student enrollment in each grade. For example, if 20 percent of the school’s test-takers were enrolled in third grade, third-grade performance results count for 30 percent of the school’s overall score.

[†] Uses 2009 – 10 data because 2010 – 11 data not available for Harriet Tubman.

In each of these subsections, we identify trends across schools and explain the rationale behind their approaches to these decisions. Although these efforts are too new to use student achievement to evaluate their long-term success, the profiles provide crucial insights for charter boards and authorizers about the challenges and lessons learned in the restart process.

Key Characteristics of the Restart: New Operators, Board Governance, and Student Enrollment

Our definition of a restart requires hiring a new operator to run the school; having the operator select a new board to oversee the charter (where allowed by the charter law and authorizer policy); and automatically reenrolling and continuing to serve the school’s original students. In this section, we describe the approach that each of the restarted schools took in these three areas.

New Operators

The process of choosing a new school operator varied across the schools we studied, both in terms of the process used to identify potential operators and the entity that selected the new operator (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Selecting a New Operator

	Power House High	Harriet Tubman	Paul Robeson	Harlem Day	Hardy Williams
Process to identify potential operators	Recommendation	Authorizer approved the restart operator	Request for proposals	Request for proposals	Recommendation
Entity that selected the new operator	Existing charter board	Authorizer	Existing charter board	Authorizer	Existing charter board
New operator selected	Noble Network	Crescent City Schools	Scholar Academies	Democracy Prep Public Schools	Mastery Charter Schools

Process to Identify Potential Operators

- Request for proposals.** At Harlem Day, the school’s authorizer issued a request for proposals (RFP) from high-quality operators experienced in or willing to take on the charter restart. Democracy Prep Public Schools submitted the only proposal to the school’s authorizer, the State University of New York (SUNY), to restart Harlem Day. Similarly, the state required that Paul Robeson’s board issue an RFP, and it received responses from two operators. On a visit to a nearby Scholar Academies school, Paul Robeson’s founder saw the type of school she always hoped that her charter school would be, leading the board to choose Scholar Academies as the new operator.
- Recommendations.** The board at Power House High identified the Noble Network as the school’s future operator based on the CMO’s reputation in Chicago and the recommendation of a community partner. At Hardy Williams, the board reached out to Mastery Charter Schools, a local CMO with a record of successful district-to-charter conversion schools.
- Authorizer approved the restart operator.** As part of its charter school authorization process, the Recovery School District (RSD) in New Orleans solicits applications from operators willing to restart failing charter schools. The RSD granted Crescent City Schools a charter to take over one failing school. When the RSD later decided to restart Harriet Tubman based on low academic performance, it assigned Crescent City Schools to be the restart operator.

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Power House High

In 2008, the Henry Ford Learning Institute (HFLI) of Illinois opened Henry Ford Academy: Power House High (PHH), a charter high school developed in partnership with Homan Square, a community development project on the site of the original Sears, Roebuck and Co. world headquarters in Chicago. For Michigan-based HFLI, Chicago was a new charter sector. PHH's neighborhood on the west side of Chicago also presented incredible challenges, and the organization struggled to produce the student outcomes it envisioned.

Choosing an Operator

In the fall of 2011, it was clear to both HFLI of Illinois and Homan Square that they needed some big changes to better serve students and families at PHH. Homan Square approached a local operator with stronger connections to and a better understanding of the Chicago market—the Noble Network. The Noble Network already operated nine charter high schools and one charter middle school in Chicago serving more than 6,500 students, all of them new starts that opened with just one grade and added another grade each year until reaching capacity. In 2011–12, Noble Network students achieved double the academic growth between the freshman and junior years as their peers at other Chicago public high schools, and their ACT scores were more than three points higher. The Noble Network had also successfully replicated its model while improving its academic outcomes every year.¹

Despite the success that the Noble Network had achieved in replicating their high school model across Chicago, the Noble Network board had adamantly opposed doing any type of restart work. The board made an exception for PHH, though, because the timing and the conditions were right. The Noble Network could not find a facility for the two new schools it wanted to open, and PHH offered a state-of-the-art facility at the Shaw Technology and Learning Center. In addition, the Noble Network had a school principal, Tom Mulder, who was ready, willing, and able to lead the restart.

Preparing for the Restart

Mulder spent much of the winter and spring of 2012 on site at PHH. During that time he evaluated all of the teachers, and found that many were trying to do a good job, but lacked the support they needed to be successful. Knowing that the Noble Network could provide the support they needed, he invited many to return, and approximately 80 percent of PHH's original staff did so. Mulder also worked with the HFLI of Illinois board of directors through the spring, communicating with students and families to explain the restart process and setting clear expectations for the changes that would take place the following year. Approximately 85 percent of eligible students reenrolled.

Logistical Details of the Restart

HFLI of Illinois worked out arrangements with the Noble Network that minimized the risk the CMO faced with the restart. In 2012–13, two schools occupied the Shaw Technology and Learning Center; PHH served grades 10–12 while DRW Trading: College Prep (DRW) served ninth grade. DRW is an official Noble Network campus, governed by the CMO's board under a network-wide charter. Grades 10–12 look and feel like a Noble Network campus, and a Noble Network principal under contract with the HFLI of Illinois board of directors oversees the daily instructional program, but the HFLI of Illinois board will continue to hold the charter for three years, when the last of PHH's original students graduate. The HFLI of Illinois board will continue to oversee the school's finances and own some of the school's contracts, but it agreed to give Mulder autonomy to run the instructional program as he sees fit. Each year DRW will add another grade, while the PHH campus will drop one. In addition, PHH is exempt from local accountability ratings until the transition is complete. To facilitate the arrangement, the authorizer granted PHH a two year-extension to its existing charter contract.

HFLI of Illinois and the Noble Network are still working out the details of the transfer of assets once the transition is complete. The transfer of many of PHH's physical assets, including furniture, supplies, and technology infrastructure depends on the Noble Network's needs, as well as who owns the assets and which funds were used to purchase them. The Noble Network will also be able to continue HFLI of Illinois's lease agreement with Homan Square.

Early Results

Performance results are not yet available for the restart, but the early indicators are promising. Attendance at both schools is up significantly compared with the same grades at PHH last year, while discipline incidences dropped significantly. Both schools also earned a school culture score of 95 or above on a 100 point scale using a Noble Network tool that considers the consistent implementation of rules, cleanliness, and safety, among other indicators.² And in the first three weeks of the restart at PHH, the average ACT score for 12th-graders grew 1.1 points from the score those students achieved at the end of their 11th-grade year.³

1. Noble Network. (n.d.). *Achievement and results*. Retrieved from <http://www.noblenetwork.org/about-noble/achievements-results>

2. Data from Noble Network [Personal correspondence], May 13, 2013.

3. Data from Power House High principal [Personal correspondence], May 6, 2013.

Entity that Selected the New Operator

While the authorizer ultimately approved each school's restart plan, and therefore the new operators, the schools' founders and boards also often played a role.

- **Existing charter board.** The charter school boards at Paul Robeson, Hardy Williams, and Power House High selected the operator and worked with that operator to meet the authorizer's approval. In the case of Hardy Williams, the authorizer was informed of the restart plan but determined that it did not require formal authorizer approval.
- **Authorizer.** The authorizer alone selected Crescent City Schools as the new operator at Harriet Tubman; the school's staff and board played no role. At Harlem Day, the authorizer used an RFP process to select Democracy Prep as the new operator, although the school's founder was very involved in the process.

Board Governance

We include governance change as a criterion in our definition of a charter school restart because it ensures operator autonomy and enforces accountability for the members of the charter board, who are ultimately responsible for school performance. At all of the restarted schools we studied, the entire board changed (or will by the end of the transition), and was selected by the new charter operator, although at Paul Robeson, the new board included the school's founder.²⁷ The type of board—network-wide or school-level—differed, however (see Figure 4, page 15).

New Operators' Motivation for Restarting Failing Charter Schools

Historically, most charter management organizations have preferred to start new schools from the ground up, often beginning with a small number of grades and students, adding a grade each year to create the time and space to build a strong school culture.²⁶ Restarts seem risky to many CMOs because that time and space does not typically exist and they must “undo” structures and practices from the previous school leaders that do not align with their model or philosophy. Consequently, few operators have been willing to take on a restart, and even the cases we studied represented the operators’ first restarts. Yet for the five CMOs we studied, taking the plunge on a restart was warranted because the students attending those schools needed and deserved a better education.

When Democracy Prep Public Schools initially considered restarting Harlem Day, it did not see an immediately attractive offer. “It was just unadulterated risk,” Katie Duffy, chief operating officer at Democracy Prep, explained. “But they were in our backyard and in our movement, and if we were serious about [our mission], then it was a moral imperative [to restart].” All of the operators with whom we spoke made a similar case, recognizing a restart’s risks and challenges, as well as the urgent need to get involved anyway.

Other incentives motivated the operators as well. Power House High’s state-of-the-art facility was a big lure for the Noble Network in Chicago, where low per-pupil funding levels and the dearth of affordable, high-quality facilities is a common impediment to charter school growth. Meanwhile, Mastery Charter Schools was attracted to the fact that Hardy Williams could grow from a K–8 school to a K–12 school, providing a feeder high school for an existing Mastery charter school within the same community. Similarly, Harlem Day offered Democracy Prep Public Schools an opportunity to apply and adapt its middle school model at the elementary level.

Figure 4. Board Governance

	Power House High	Harriet Tubman	Paul Robeson	Harlem Day	Hardy Williams
Members replaced	100%	100%	100% ²⁸	100%	100%
Type of board	Network-wide ²⁹	Network-wide	School-level	School-level	Network-wide

- **Network-wide boards.** At Harriet Tubman, a local, network-wide board of the new CMO operator assumed governance responsibility of the restart.³⁰ The restart at Henry Ford Academy: Power House High involves a three-year transition. During the transition, two schools will operate in the same building. Henry Ford Academy: Power House High will phase out, serving one grade less each year, while DRW Trading: College Prep will serve one additional grade each year. Beginning in 2015–16, DRW Trading: College Prep will be the “restarted” school, serving all students in the building. At that time, a local, network-wide board will govern the restarted high school.
- **School-level boards.** At Harlem Day and Paul Robeson, the legal board entity remained, and the new operator recruited and selected new members to serve on a school-level board. Similarly, the Hardy Williams legal board entity remained, but all existing board members resigned, and Mastery’s governing board members replaced them.³¹

Student Enrollment

In each of the schools profiled, all of the students attending the charter school before the restart were guaranteed a seat in the restarted school—a key element of restart. As described in more detail under “Communicating with Families” on page 22, all of the operators spent significant time and energy speaking with students’ families, explaining what would be different once

the school restarted, and inviting questions. However, operators had mixed success retaining students. While most students at Paul Robeson, Hardy Williams, and Power House High reenrolled, fewer students returned to Harriet Tubman and Harlem Day—about 40 percent and 70 percent, respectively. The schools often enrolled new students to compensate for any decrease in student enrollment, or even increased enrollment in some instances.

Figure 5. Percentage of Eligible Students who Reenrolled After Restart

Power House High	Harriet Tubman	Paul Robeson	Harlem Day	Hardy Williams
~ 85%	~ 40%	~95%	~ 70%	~90%

- Crescent City Schools attributes the low student return rates at Harriet Tubman largely to challenges communicating with families during the transition process and to the fact that the outgoing operator had other schools in the area, to which it recruited Harriet Tubman students. Crescent City recruited many new students, however, increasing the school’s overall enrollment by 150 students—all of whom previously attended failing schools.
- At Harlem Day, Democracy Prep’s communications strategy included a series of frank and difficult conversations with parents about their children’s performance and how expectations and culture at the school would change, including a plan to hold approximately 40 percent of students back a grade because they were not academically prepared to advance. Heading into the first year of the restart, approximately 70 percent of students returned to Harlem Day; these retention decisions were likely a factor.³²

Related Restart Elements: Charter Status, Asset Transfer, Staffing

In addition to the three restart criteria, the five restarted schools all had to address other important legal and operational questions. We describe below how each of the restarts addressed the status of the charter, asset transfer, and staffing.

Status of the Charter

The charter agreement itself changed to varying degrees in each of the restarted schools. Three schools transferred the existing charter to the new operator, but two of the restarts took place under a new charter.

Figure 6. Charter Status at Restarted School

	Power House High	Harriet Tubman	Paul Robeson	Harlem Day	Hardy Williams
Charter status	New	New	Existing	Existing	Existing
Type of charter	Network-wide ³³	School-level	School-level	School-level	School-level

- **Transfer of existing charter.** At Paul Robeson, Harlem Day, and Hardy Williams, the new operator took over the existing charter. At Hardy Williams, the authorizer was informed of the restart plan but did not require changes to the charter agreement. At the other two schools, however, the charter authorizer either required or agreed to some revisions. For example, SUNY reauthorized Harlem Day’s original charter, but it required that Democracy Prep submit an application with a level of detail similar to starting a new school. Democracy Prep also changed the school’s name from Harlem Day to Harlem Prep in the revised charter.
- **New charter.** The Harriet Tubman restart required the dissolution of the original charter and creation of a new charter for Crescent City Schools. At Power House High, the charter governing the grades that Henry Ford Learning Institute of Illinois continues to manage has not changed. A network-wide charter governs DRW Trading: College Prep, however, and will govern the fully restarted school once the transition is complete in 2015–16.

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Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman opened as a traditional district school in the Algiers community of New Orleans. Like so many New Orleans schools, however, Harriet Tubman became a charter school following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In 2006, the Algiers Charter Schools Association (ACSA) took over operation and governance of the K–8 school, but student performance languished. After five years, the school’s growth performance score, a composite score that every school in the state receives, was just 55.4 out of 200, rendering the school “academically unacceptable.” It also fell short of the academic gains outlined in ACSA’s charter agreement, and the authorizer, the Recovery School District (RSD), revoked ACSA’s charter.

Choosing an Operator

Crescent City Schools (CCS) was founded in 2010 as a charter management organization with a focus on improving failing schools. Although the CMO did not manage any schools in 2010, both its co-founders brought more than a decade of experience in district and charter schools, including leading high-performing charter schools serving low-income students. CCS received a Type 5 charter from the RSD, which granted CCS the ability to take over a failing school. The charter did not specify which school CCS would take over, however; the RSD made that decision in early 2011, naming CCS as Harriet Tubman’s new operator.

Preparing for the Restart

The spring and summer leading up to CCS’s first year operating Harriet Tubman were rife with challenges. ASCA, which operated six other elementary and three high schools in the Algiers community, rarely allowed CCS to come into the building and did not work with CCS to communicate the changes. Meanwhile, the authorizer had not yet developed a well-defined restart process or set clear expectations for everyone involved in it—both of which it has since established. CCS therefore focused much of its energy on introducing itself to the community, reassuring parents that Harriet Tubman would remain open, and explaining why families should continue to enroll their children there. CCS staff leased space in a nearby community center, held meetings, and stood across the street from the school, speaking with families dropping off or picking up their children. As a result of these efforts and others, about 40 percent of Harriet Tubman’s original students reenrolled despite ACSA’s efforts to recruit students to its other schools. In addition, CCS increased Harriet Tubman’s enrollment from 390 students to 540 students.

When CCS got the keys to the building, it faced another challenge—preparing the building for students. The school had a free lease for the building from the RSD, but years of neglect by the Orleans Parish School Board and ACSA had created an environment unfit for children. CCS spent about \$200,000 dollars improving the building, and with the help of a thousand volunteers, cleaned it from top to bottom, painted walls, replaced air conditioners, and built new bathrooms.

Logistical Details of the Restart

When Harriet Tubman opened for the 2011–12 school year, it did so under a new charter with a new board and an entirely new staff. As a Type 5 charter, Harriet Tubman’s accountability status reset and the school received a yearlong reprieve from receiving a letter grade from the state.

Early Results

In the restart’s first year, Harriet Tubman’s growth performance score jumped 11 points, to 66 out of 200, representing more than double the growth the school made in the three years the state calculated a performance score for it while under the operation of ASCA.¹ While student performance is not yet where school leaders want it to be, there are promising signs that this year will be even better. Attendance is at 94 percent, parent satisfaction is at 95 percent, and

interim tests showed marked improvement over the previous year's scores.² Beginning in July 2013, Crescent City will also take over another low-performing school, Habans Elementary, a sign of the RSD's faith in CCS's ability to do this restart work.

1. Analysis compares growth from 2007–08 to 2009–10, the years Algiers Charter School Association ran the school and a performance score was reported, to the growth from 2009–10 to 2011–12, when Crescent City Schools took over the school. The state did not calculate a performance score for 2010–11. The state also did not calculate a schoolwide performance score for Harriet Tubman between 2004 and 2007. Louisiana Department of Education. (n.d.). *Archived school performance score data*. Retrieved from <http://www.louisianabelieves.com/data/sps/>

2. Data from Crescent City Schools [Personal correspondence], May 6, 2013.

Transferring School Assets

In four of the schools, the restart operator maintained all of the school's assets—including facilities, furniture, and technology—after the transition. In the fifth school, Henry Ford Academy: Power House High, the details of the asset transfer are still developing. However, all five schools leased their facilities (rather than owning them), and the facility lease represented the most significant asset, or liability, the new operator received. For example, in the case of Power House High, the favorable lease terms and exceptional condition of the facility represented a significant benefit to the new operator. In contrast, Harriet Tubman's building was in poor condition, motivating Crescent City Schools to invest approximately \$200,000 in building renovations before the first day of school, as well as the time of nearly 1,000 volunteers to clean the building and make repairs. The building that Democracy Prep inherited for Harlem Day was in better shape, but it is not conducive to a school environment, and the lease is expensive and depreciating, creating more of a liability than an asset.

The legal mechanism for facilitating the transfer of assets depended on the status of the charter.

- **Asset transfer under an existing charter.** When the restart operator maintained the original charter, assets automatically transferred to the new operator because they remained under the control of the new board as the same legal entity. For example, where there was a fund balance in the original school's account, the new board and operator had access to those funds for the benefit of the school (and could not share them with other schools or the central office of the CMO). At the same time, the new board was responsible for the school's liabilities.
- **Asset transfer under a new charter.** When the restart operator received a new charter, all of the assets purchased by the school with public funds, as well as any public fund surplus, remained with the school. At Harriet Tubman, those assets included a fund surplus of more than \$600,000, although it took more than a year and a half for the funds to finally transfer. Henry Ford Learning Institute of Illinois and the Noble Network are still working out the details of the transfer of assets once the transition is complete. The transfer of many of Power House High's physical assets, including furniture, supplies, and technology infrastructure depends on the Noble Network's needs, as well as who owns the assets and which funds were used to purchase them. The Noble Network will also be able to continue Henry Ford Learning Institute of Illinois's lease agreement.

Staffing

All of the operators except for Crescent City Schools, which the outgoing operator rarely allowed into Harriet Tubman, took time in the spring to engage with the school and assess the school’s existing staff, including the teachers, school leaders, and support personnel whom the low-performing charter school employed. All of the new operators had autonomy over staffing and hiring decisions, but their assessments led to varying degrees of staff turnover across sites (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Staffing Changes After the Restart

	Power House High	Harriet Tubman	Paul Robeson	Harlem Day	Hardy Williams
Principal	Replaced	Replaced	Replaced	Replaced	Rehired
Teachers	~20% replaced	100% replaced	~65% replaced	~90% replaced	~15% replaced

- Replaced fewer than 20 percent of teachers.** At Power House High, about 20 percent of the teachers were replaced; at Hardy Williams, about 15 percent were replaced. Both operators believed that many of the school’s teachers could be developed with the support and structures the operator offered. According to several interviewees, one of the new operators’ biggest contributions was introducing strong structures and systems to the schools they were restarting to support a large number of existing teachers.
- Replaced most or all teachers.** At the other three schools, the new operators identified less potential in the existing staff. Democracy Prep replaced more than 90 percent of teachers on the Harlem Day staff, while at Paul Robeson, 65 percent of teachers were replaced. The outgoing operator at Harriet Tubman ran other schools in the city, and encouraged existing teachers to work at those schools rather than staying on with the new operator; as a result, 100 percent of teachers were replaced at the restarted school.
- Rehiring the principal.** Just one operator, Mastery Charter Schools, chose to rehire the existing school principal. According to Mastery, the principal had participated in a number of highly regarded leadership programs and had made some good decisions that benefited the school. The principal had not been able to choose her leadership team, however, and lacked strong systems and structures. Mastery could address both of those challenges and asked the principal to stay.

Transition Process for the Restart

It took time for the boards and authorizers at the sites we studied to decide to pursue a restart strategy and identify an operator, and for the operators to lay the groundwork for the following school year. As a result, the restart process often started in the fall or winter before the restarted school launched, and at Power House High, the Noble Network’s restart will take three years to complete.³⁴ Below we describe how the restart was initiated at each of the schools, and key activities that took place during the transition.

Entity Initiating the Restart

Low student performance motivated all five restarts, but in two schools the authorizer initiated the process, while the existing board did so at the others (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Entity Initiating the Charter Restart

Power House High	Harriet Tubman	Paul Robeson	Harlem Day	Hardy Williams
Board	Authorizer	Board	Authorizer	Board

- **Authorizer.** At Harriet Tubman, the authorizer decided that the school would restart and identified an operator to do the work. The authorizer for Harlem Day threatened to close the school, but restart was not initially an option. The school’s founder, motivated to keep his school open and give students the academic experience he envisioned when he started the school, worked with the state to develop a restart option.³⁵
- **School board.** At Power House High, Paul Robeson, and Hardy Williams, the original school boards initiated the restart before charter renewal was at stake, when performance results fell short of expectations.

Although the authorizers were ultimately responsible for approving the restart plan, their roles varied significantly across the sites we studied and were seldom clearly defined. In all cases, the charter restart was a new process for the authorizer, school board, and new school operator. Across the sites, however, the authorizer’s most substantial role was motivating the restart and approving the restart plans presented to them.

Key Activities During the Transition

The restarts we studied took between four and seven months from the time the board or authorizer decided to pursue the restart and the authorizer approved the restart plan. In most cases, the operators began spending time in their schools in the spring before the restart officially began.³⁶ During this time, the operators’ main purpose was not to assume operation of the school, but to establish a presence in the building and prepare for the following year by evaluating staff and assets, and communicating with the school community.³⁷

Assessing Staff and Assets

At three campuses—Power House High, Harlem Day, and Hardy Williams—the school operator spent substantial time in the spring assessing staff and assets at the school. Similarly, Scholar Academies spent several weeks towards the end of the school year engaging in the same types of activities.

- **Assessing Staff.** The new operators met and assessed the strengths of the current school’s staff—leading in part to the staffing changes described above. Part of this strategy involved introducing themselves, what their new school would offer, and what would be different in the building. In all cases, existing staff were invited to apply for open positions, and in some schools, the operator specifically committed to offering existing staff first-round interviews.
- **Reviewing Assets.** The new school operators also conducted financial and operational audits of the restarted schools. While operators generally conducted some of this analysis before agreeing to the restart (e.g., reviewing financial documents), other reviews did not take place until later on. These exercises often identified staffing and functions that the CMO’s back office already provided, such as performance data analysis, allowing the operator to redirect those resources to academic programming.

Figure 9. Major Benchmarks and Timeline Related to the Restart

	Power House High	Harriet Tubman	Paul Robeson	Harlem Day	Hardy Williams
Board or authorizer decided to pursue restart	September / October 2011	December 2010	March / April 2012	November 2010	October / November 2010
Restart operator chosen	October to December 2011	February 2011	April 2012	December 2010	November / December 2010
Restart operator started working in building	January 2012	July 2011	May 2012	January 2011	March 2011
Authorizer approved restart plan	April 2012	January 2011	May 2012	March 2011	n / a*

* Charter authorizer was informed of the restart plan but determined that no formal authorizer approval was required.

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Paul Robeson

When Barbara Gaeta founded Paul Robeson Charter School in 2008, she wanted to offer Trenton, NJ, residents a diverse educational experience and an opportunity for high achievement in an area where few such opportunities existed. Four years later, however, the state Department of Education issued the grades 4–8 school a 90-day probation, citing systematic problems that resulted in low student achievement.¹ Fewer than 40 percent of students were proficient in math, while fewer than 30 percent were proficient in English language arts.²

School officials sought advice and consulted with the authorizer, the New Jersey Department of Education, to develop a remediation plan in advance of an upcoming charter renewal decision in spring 2012. Concerned that internal turnaround efforts would not be sufficient to dramatically improve school performance and avoid a non-renewal decision, Gaeta pursued an alternative option—firing herself and her board and handing over the management and governance of the school to a new operator.

Choosing an Operator

The Paul Robeson board identified three potential operators and issued an RFP to them for the charter restart. One never responded, and the board thought that a second did not feel like a good fit for the school community. On a visit to a school run by the third operator, Scholar Academies, Gaeta saw the type of school she always hoped Paul Robeson would be, both in terms of achievement results and school culture. Scholar Academies already operated two charters in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. Schoolwide pass rates at the nearby Philadelphia campuses exceeded performance in the surrounding School District of Philadelphia by more than 25 percentage points in both reading and math, and exceeded state averages as well.³ And Scholar Academies achieved these results despite the fact that most of its sixth-grade students entered its charter schools between two and four grade levels behind in math and reading, according to nationally normed assessments.

For Scholar Academies, the timing and conditions were right to restart Paul Robeson. The CMO had already been looking to build a presence in Trenton, and Paul Robeson had a fund balance of more than \$1 million to support a quick transition. Scholar Academies was also committed to restarting failing schools, where it saw the greatest student need. In fact, it had already managed two district school restarts; Paul Robeson would be its first charter restart, however.

Preparing for the Restart

The Paul Robeson board did not select Scholar Academies as the RFP winner until April 30, 2012, and the state department of education did not formally approve the restart until May 2012. Following these decisions, Scholar Academies invested significant time and energy through the late spring communicating with staff and parents, including renting a van and taking parents to visit Scholar Academy schools in Philadelphia. Although the timeline for communication and planning was short, the CMO had the support and cooperation of Gaeta and the existing board, and almost all of the school's students reenrolled.

Early Results

Since Scholar Academies is still in its first year of the restart, summative school performance data are not yet available. Results from second-quarter benchmark assessments showed positive signs, including an increase of 22 and 44 percentage points in reading and math scores, respectively, versus last year's performance levels.⁴

1. Times of Trenton Editorial Board. (2012, May 21). Noble move saves Paul Robeson Charter School in Trenton from closure [editorial]. *The Trenton Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nj.com/times-opinion/index.ssf/2012/05/editorial_noble_effort_to_save.html

2. New Jersey Department of Education. (n.d.). *NJ school performance report*. Retrieved from <http://education.state.nj.us/pr/>
3. Scholar Academies. (n.d.). *Scholar Academies history of success*. Retrieved from <http://scholaracademies.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/page0001.jpg>
4. Data from Scholar Academies [Personal correspondence], May 9, 2013.

Communicating with Families

Nearly all of the school operators noted that they prioritized community engagement and communication early in the restart transition, in part because it was so critical to ensuring that students reenrolled—a major goal of the restart strategy. They made an effort to communicate with staff and families about the restart well in advance of the new school year, even at Harlem Day, where the authorizer did not approve the restart plan until the March before. In all cases, the new operator met with students and families to communicate their school transition plan, vision for school excellence, and high expectations for student success.

To share this information, the operators held meetings with the original board, sent information home with students, invited parents to visit their other schools, designated a person to listen to and address concerns, and engaged in other communication efforts. Some of the most difficult communication challenges presented themselves when the outgoing board or operator did not support the restart or when the restart plan was not approved until late spring or early summer:

- Crescent City Schools (CCS) faced one of the toughest communications challenges at Harriet Tubman, where the outgoing board and operator did not support the restart and rarely allowed CCS access to the building. CCS therefore leased a space in a nearby community center, taking every opportunity to talk with parents to assure them that the school would remain open and to make the case for reenrolling their children there.
- At Harlem Day, Democracy Prep started to communicate in January, two months before the authorizer approved the restart plan. In addition to speaking with parents about the restart and Democracy Prep running Harlem Day, the operator also worked with parents to develop a contingency plan in case the restart did not happen and the school had to close.
- Parents and staff did not learn of the restart plan at Paul Robeson until the authorizer approved it in May. The leaders of Paul Robeson and Scholar Academies largely worked together to communicate a unified and positive message about the transition. Scholar Academies even chartered buses for parents to visit its other schools in Philadelphia. Despite the late notification and announcement of the restart, parents were generally happy that the school would remain open, and student reenrollment rates remained high for the restart.

Community members were often disheartened by the decision to restart and apprehensive about the future, but the operators we interviewed reported that families preferred restart when the only other option was closure. Interviewees also reported that families were hopeful that the new providers could improve student performance. In schools where the outgoing board and operator supported the restart and publicly promoted it, the communication effort tended to garner more support.

Early Indicators of Success

It is too soon to know whether these restarts have been a success, as measured by sustained improvements in student academic performance over time. However, there have been some encouraging signs in terms of student enrollment, parent and community satisfaction, and academic achievement.

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Harlem Day

Ben Lambert founded Harlem Day charter school in 2001. Nine years and nine principals later, just a quarter of students were proficient on the state math exam, and even fewer were proficient on the state reading exam.¹ Knowing that it was only a matter of time before the state would consider whether Harlem Day should continue operating, Lambert picked up the phone and called the head of the state’s charter program to make an offer that would best serve the students attending his school. He would replace his board—including himself—and turn the school over to a new operator. The authorizer, the State University of New York (SUNY), agreed to give it a try.

Choosing an Operator

In fall 2010, SUNY issued a request for proposals, inviting CMOs to participate in what the state called a “restructured renewal” of Harlem Day. Only Democracy Prep responded. At the time, it operated two middle schools and one high school in New York City, all of which earned an “A” rating every year from the city’s Chancellor’s Progress Report.²

For Democracy Prep, restart was a natural extension of its mission, a point the CMO’s chief operating officer, who had served as Harlem Day’s director of student affairs several years earlier, stressed to Democracy Prep’s founder and board. Democracy Prep had already identified a strong, experienced elementary school principal, and the Harlem Day restart provided an opportunity to expand its model to elementary grades. SUNY initially rejected Democracy Prep’s restart plan because it did not have enough detail, but gave the CMO another chance and accepted it in March 2011.

Preparing for the Restart

Even as Democracy Prep fleshed out its restart plan and SUNY reviewed it, Lambert and Democracy Prep moved ahead. Lambert raised philanthropic funding to hire the new principal and several other Democracy Prep staff as consultants through the spring. The principal evaluated teachers and developed individual growth plans for them. Staff from Democracy Prep also worked with Lambert over the spring and summer to communicate with parents. In addition to explaining how the school would change in the fall, Democracy Prep spent a lot of time meeting with parents to discuss student achievement, which was the first time that many parents heard that their child was performing below grade level. As a result of these communication efforts, approximately 70 percent of students reenrolled at the school.

Logistical Details of the Restart

Democracy Prep took over a revised charter in June, which renamed the school Harlem Prep. All of the board members were replaced, and Democracy Prep assumed all of the school’s assets and liabilities, including an expensive facility lease. When classes started in September, four of 34 instructional staff members returned and about 40 percent of the school’s returning students went back to repeat the grade in which they had enrolled the previous year.

Early Results

In the restart’s first year (2011–12), Harlem Prep scholars achieved the highest proficiency growth scores in English language arts (ELA) in New York state and the highest combined proficiency growth scores in ELA and math in New York City.³ Harlem Prep received an “A” on the 2011–12 city’s Progress Report, and its overall performance score jumped from the lowest 3 percent of city elementary schools to the top 4 percent in a single year.⁴ Harlem Prep has continued to make progress in 2012–13, with the school reporting 97 percent attendance and very strong interim growth performance on a number of benchmark exams. As a result of the school’s performance in 2011–12, Harlem Prep also received authorizer approval to expand to K–8, significantly increasing student enrollment. Democracy Prep has also taken on a second restart in Camden, NJ, demonstrating its commitment to charter restart as a viable and replicable strategy.

1. Based on Public Impact analysis of state performance data from 2009–10. Results are weighted for student enrollment. New York State Department of Education. (n.d.). *English language arts (ELA) and mathematic assessment results*. Retrieved from http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/ela-math/home_2010.html

2. Democracy Prep. (n.d.). *Our schools*. Retrieved from <http://democracyprep.org/schools>

3. Democracy Prep. (n.d.). *Harlem Prep Elementary School: About*. Retrieved from <http://democracyprep.org/schools/about/harlem-prep-elementary-school>

4. NYC Department of Education. (n.d.). *Find a progress report* [searched for progress reports for Harlem Prep Charter School]. Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/report/FindAProgressReport/default.htm>

- **Student enrollment.** All but one school retained most of the original students, with three schools retaining at least 85 percent of eligible students. The high reenrollment rate indicates that restarts have successfully minimized disruptions to students and families.
- **Conditions for learning.** Data also point to improvement in the school environment:
 - All of the schools reported attendance rates above 90 percent.
 - At Power House High, fights formerly occurred frequently, but in the first year of the restart have been rare in either of the schools in the building.
 - At Harriet Tubman, 95 percent of parents responding to a survey said that they were satisfied with the school.
 - At Harlem Day (now Harlem Prep), teachers responding to a survey about the school environment indicated big improvements in the restart’s first year.³⁸
- **Student performance.** Although all of these schools have further to go to meet the academic goals they set for their students, performance is up across the board.
 - Harlem Day (now Harlem Prep) scholars achieved the highest proficiency growth scores in English language arts (ELA) in New York state, and the highest combined proficiency growth scores in ELA and math in New York City.³⁹ As a result, the school scored an “A” on the 2011–12 New York City Progress Report, and its overall performance score jumped from the lowest 3 percent of city elementary schools to the top 4 percent in a single year.⁴⁰
 - In the restart’s first year, Harriet Tubman’s growth performance score, a composite performance score the state assigns to every school in the state, jumped 11 points in the restart’s first year, earning the school the highest performance score it has had since Hurricane Katrina.⁴¹
 - At Hardy Williams, the schoolwide pass rate increased by more than five percentage points in reading, and by more than 13 percentage points in math in the restart’s first full year.⁴²
 - In the first three weeks of the restart at Power House High, the average ACT score for 12th-graders grew 1.1 points from the score those students achieved at the end of 11th grade.⁴³
 - Results from second-quarter benchmark assessments at Paul Robeson showed positive signs, including an increase of 22 and 44 percent points in reading and math scores, respectively, compared to last year’s performance levels.⁴⁴

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Hardy Williams

The Hardy Williams charter school opened in Philadelphia, PA, in 1999. Although the school established a safe environment, active school community, and sound fiscal management, it persistently struggled academically. As part of internal turnaround efforts, the board twice changed management partnerships with external organizations, and made a board chair transition in 2009 to spur school improvements. But when the 2010–11 school year kicked off, fewer than half of its students were proficient in math or reading on the last state exam, and the school had failed to meet its performance targets under the No Child Left Behind law for four years in a row, placing it in “Corrective Action I” status.¹

With charter renewal just a year ahead, and student performance falling short of the high expectations envisioned for the school, the Hardy Williams board looked for a new option. It began conversations with local high-performing charter schools about a school management transition, eventually identifying Mastery Charter Schools as the ideal partner. Although the Hardy Williams board initially proposed a management agreement with Mastery to operate the school under the existing governance structure, the two sides eventually agreed to have the school come under Mastery’s governance structure.

Choosing an Operator

At the time, Mastery operated seven Philadelphia charter schools, serving 4,200 students in grades K–12. Six of the schools were turnarounds of previously failing district schools. After Mastery assumed management of those schools, test scores increased by an average of more than 50 percentage points per grade and subject, violence decreased by 80 percent, and student turnover dropped by a third.² Mastery’s leaders were interested in serving more children when the Hardy Williams board contacted them. The CMO was also looking for a natural feeder high school for one of its nearby middle schools, and Hardy Williams allowed the school to serve students in grades K–12. The school’s founder and the Hardy Williams board had a good relationship with Mastery leaders, and they respected Mastery’s school turnaround success. They were also confident that Mastery had a plan and the capacity to build on existing school strengths, while dramatically improving academic performance.

Preparing for the Restart

Mastery became an “active partner” in the school beginning in March 2011, taking over daily management as well as the board. Mastery kept the principal in place and spent the rest of the year getting to know and evaluating teachers, observing them, holding professional development sessions, and giving them opportunities to meet with Mastery’s human resources personnel to learn about benefits as a Mastery employee.

That spring, Mastery also conducted a full audit of the school, reviewing all financial documents. In addition, it and the Hardy Williams board actively engaged the school community about the transition. Parent reaction was mixed when the Hardy Williams board announced its decision in fall 2010 to transition school management and governance to Mastery. In its communication to parents and community members, the Hardy Williams board was clear about the school’s low student performance and the possibility that the school could be closed if academic performance did not significantly improve. It also emphasized the success of Mastery schools. For its part, Mastery met individually with school faculty, and it placed an employee at the school to serve as point of contact about the restart.

Logistical Details of the Restart

The existing Hardy Williams board transitioned out over the spring of 2011, until the last member—the school’s founder, state Senator Anthony Williams—resigned in September. Consistent with the governance structure for all its Philadelphia charter schools, members of the Mastery board were elected to serve on the Hardy Williams board.³

The principal and about 85 percent of the teachers remained on staff, although Mastery cut back on operational staff based on its spring audit. Approximately 90 percent of the school's students reenrolled the following school year.

The school's assets remained, including a fund balance of over \$1 million that the Hardy Williams board had raised to support the acquisition of a new facility. Mastery also took over the school's building lease.

Early Results

In 2011–12, the first full year of the restart, the schoolwide proficiency rate improved by more than five percentage points in reading, and by more than 13 percentage points in math.⁴ In addition, former board members from Hardy Williams reported that the school has maintained an active parent organization and close ties to the local community. One of the most meaningful affirmations came, however, when a staff member who initially was a strong opponent of the restart changed her tune, telling the former board chair that the restart was the best decision that the school had ever made for its students.

1. Pennsylvania Department of Education. (2011). *Charter annual report—Hardy Williams*. Retrieved from http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/document/1256575/hardy_williams_academy_cs-charter_annual_report-approved_2010_report_pdf; Hardy Williams Academy. (2011). *Title I SIG (1003g) 10–11 grant—school level*. Retrieved from http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CDUQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.portal.state.pa.us%2Fportal%2Fserver.pt%2Fdocument%2F1257214%2Ffunded_10-11_sig_hardy_williams_cs_school_level_pdf&ei=Pk3EUaepG63H4AP3rYHAAQ&usg=AFQjCNFMQj4QnpMDftFWgCsDdSotf6DHZQ&sig2=Iv8n7Zb5QXbK_B-wWnOZIA&bvm=bv.48293060,d.dmg&cad=rja

2. Mastery Charter Schools. (2011, March 10). Hardy Williams Academy Charter School plans affiliation with Mastery Charter Schools [press release]. Retrieved from <http://thenotebook.org/sites/default/files/HWACS%20MCS%20partnership%20press%20release%20022311-1.doc>

3. Each of Mastery's 11 charter schools has its own board, including Hardy Williams. However, the same individuals serve on all 11 boards. In addition, Hardy Williams has an active parent's association with representation on Mastery's network-wide Parent Advisory Group. Parents select two to three members of the Parent Advisory Group to serve on Mastery's 11 school boards.

4. Pennsylvania Department of Education. (n.d.). *AYP facts*. Retrieved from <http://paayp.emetric.net/>

- **More restarts.** Both Crescent City Schools and Harlem Day have started work on a second restart, signaling the authorizers' confidence in the operators, as well as the restart strategy more broadly.

Although these five examples should not serve as a prototype for conducting a restart, they all point to ways to implement a smoother, better restart in the future.



Part 3. Recommendations

Relatively few charter schools have restarted, and the schools we studied represent early efforts at a strategy that is still very much in development. These early efforts, however, highlight a number of successes, lessons learned, and challenges.

A restart allows charter school boards to effectively and proactively address poor academic performance well before charter renewal and closure become an issue. Although authorizer-initiated restarts can provide all of the benefits described in the first part of this report, board-initiated restarts have several important advantages. They can happen sooner, and therefore provide students with better educational outcomes more quickly. They avoid the negative press and conversations associated with the threat of closure, letting board members and families have an honest discussion about how to provide the best education while all options are still on the table. Finally, they offer board members greater opportunity to ensure that their students are left in the best hands possible.

Below we offer recommendations to make charter school restart an effective and replicable authorization strategy, as a part of a proactive process that charter authorizers and school boards can use to provide dramatically better educational options for their students. The recommendations focus specifically on the roles of two key actors—the existing board and the authorizer.

The Role of the Existing School Board

As the school profiles described in Part 2 demonstrate, the existing school board can play a critical role in initiating the restart process and making it run smoothly by:

1. incorporating the restart strategy into school improvement planning,
2. augmenting the board's capacity for restart, and
3. championing the restart publicly to build support for it in the community.

1. Incorporate restart strategy into school improvement planning options

The charter school board's first responsibility must always be to students and families, rather than to the school itself. Accordingly, boards should actively consider restart, as well as other strategies such as closure, when school performance is weak. Boards can take three steps to incorporate restart into their school improvement planning:

- **Rigorously evaluate school performance on an ongoing basis.** As a first step, school boards should rigorously evaluate school performance on an ongoing basis. At a minimum, school boards should conduct a comprehensive review of performance against established school goals every quarter.
- **Consider restart as a potential strategy.** Once board members identify the need for improvement, and well before school closure becomes a possibility, they should consider restart as one of several potential strategies to pursue. They must establish very clear, measurable, and rigorous goals to evaluate the extent to which internal efforts are leading to dramatic, sustainable improvements at the school and whether more systemic change is needed.
- **Keep students' interests first.** Boards must hold themselves to high standards and be prepared to relinquish their oversight authority when it is in students' best interests. Choosing to restart a charter school can be a tremendous challenge when board members have dedicated their time, reputation, and personal resources to the school. But as several board members explained in our interviews, restart is ultimately a continuation of the school's commitment to students.

2. Augment the board's capacity for restart

Experience from the restarted schools we studied shows that a restart will likely increase board members' immediate responsibilities and workload to identify potential operators, transfer resources and assets, communicate with the school's students and families, and otherwise facilitate the restart as needed. Restart activities may also require new skills and experiences that existing board members do not possess, such as additional project management capacity to plan and manage restart activities, knowledge of and relationships with high-performing charter organizations, an understanding of the characteristics of a high-quality operator, legal expertise to advise on the implications of restart, and public relations expertise to assist with parent and broader community engagement.

Charter school boards committed to restart should therefore reach out to an external partner to conduct an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses and consider how to fill any gaps they might have, most likely by working with a skilled and knowledgeable consultant to help facilitate and manage the decision-making and transition process.

3. Champion the restart publicly to build support for it in the community

The restarted schools we reviewed demonstrated how board members can increase the likelihood of a successful restart by endorsing it and working with the new operator to explain it and its benefits for students. Given that parents chose to enroll their child at the charter school, board members and other school leaders likely have a relationship with them that the new operator has yet to build. The existing board can greatly support the success of the new operator—and thus, students—by engaging families in the transition and serving as a core messenger. In addition, the restart will benefit if board members work with school staff to win their support for the strategy and effectively manage the transition process.

The Role of the Authorizer

In the restarts we studied, authorizers often played two roles: They helped initiate the restart process by exerting accountability pressures on schools, and they approved the final restart plan. To establish a successful and replicable restart process, authorizers can take additional steps, including:

1. encouraging boards of struggling schools to consider a restart as part of school improvement planning,
2. establishing a transparent and rigorous process to evaluate and approve restart plans, and
3. establishing a clear and comprehensive process for implementing the restart plan once a plan is approved.

1. Encourage boards of struggling schools to consider a restart as part of school improvement planning

Experience from the restart sites suggests that authorizers can encourage boards of struggling charter schools to consider restart by emphasizing the board's public obligation to its students and families and by discussing restart as a viable and welcomed strategy. Key to these conversations is showing how the school is performing against its charter goals and relative to the local charter school community, to help board members understand the degree to which the school is falling short of expectations, and to signal the need for a new improvement strategy. Authorizers should set clear performance criteria, including the conditions under which a struggling charter school should consider a restart. Boards should receive this performance information long before their charter is up for renewal, so they can pursue restart as a proactive improvement strategy rather than a last-minute alternative to closure forced upon the school by the authorizer.

Of course, a charter restart is not always the best or right option for a school. It requires an operator with a high potential to lead a successful restart, and closure may still be a better choice if students have other high-quality school options. Authorizers should therefore always objectively assess their authorization options.

2. Establish a transparent and rigorous process to evaluate and approve restart plans

Several of the restart profiles showed the need to establish a fair, transparent selection process for restart providers that clearly identifies the characteristics of a high-quality restart plan, such as a description of the operator's credentials, who will serve on the board, what will change in the building, how the operator will recruit students to reenroll in the school, and how the operator will dramatically accelerate learning and catch up students who are behind their grade level. These guidelines should apply to any restart, although they may be tailored for specific schools. They should include both the authorizer's evaluation and approval criteria for the restart plan and the qualifications upon which operators will be evaluated. By taking this step, authorizers can make the restart option more attractive to proven and high-potential operators and ensure that the restart will be a good fit from the beginning.

As the restart profiles show, there are several options for selecting a restart plan and provider. A school board or authorizer could issue a request for proposals and select from the applicants, or enter into direct talks with a potential operator based on a recommendation or review of the operator's record. Alternatively, an authorizer can pre-approve a list of providers to give school boards and authorizers a means to initiate discussions about restart opportunities. Regardless, the same set of criteria ought to guide the selection process, including evidence of the operators' past success (e.g., a history of students achievement and growth at the operator's other schools), replicable systems and structures, a strong talent pipeline, sound fiscal management and the overall strength of the restart plan presented (see "Choosing a New School Operator," page 7).

Ultimately, however, the authorizer is responsible for approving or rejecting a restart operator and its plan, just as it does already for a new charter school applicant. The criteria for approving a restart provider should therefore be rigorous and aligned to the authorizer's decision-making process.

3. Establish and oversee a clear and comprehensive process for implementing the restart once a plan is approved

The operators, board members, and authorizers with whom we spoke emphasized the need to establish a comprehensive process for the restart that outlines a timeline for key activities and the role each major actor will play, similar to the processes authorizers have created for new charter applications and renewals. Clarifying the steps in the process as well as roles and responsibilities ensures that all actors understand what is expected of them and how any differences will be resolved. While existing and new school operators and boards should decide upon many details in the transition plan for their specific restart, the authorizer should identify the critical steps in any restart process, request a plan for addressing each of those steps, and enforce the plan once it has been created.

At a minimum, the transition process the authorizer sets should include:

- **A clear timeline for the restart process** that provides enough time to effectively communicate with the school community and to make the transition to a new operator and board. Alternatively, the authorizer could request that the school board or operator submit a timeline for addressing key restart activities.



- **A legal structure for the restart**, including what adaptations to the current charter are needed or whether a new charter is required (see “New or Revised? Which Charter to Use for a Restart”).
- **Guidelines for the transfer of assets**, including an accounting of and process to transfer the facility, inventory, and excess funds.
- **Guidelines for record-keeping**, and a process to transfer student records, administrative records, and other critical documentation.
- **Guidelines for communication**, including expectations for engaging students, parents, staff, the broader community, and other stakeholders.
- **Mediation process** between the current board/operator and the restart provider, should conflicts arise during the transition.
- **Clear benchmarks** outlining expectations for the restart once the new operator takes over the building, including yearly student performance targets (see “External Conditions to Support Restarts,” page 31).

New or Revised? Which Charter to Use for a Restart

Most of the restarts we studied continued to use the same charter, but some required a new one. So which is the better option?

In many cases, the simplest option may be to allow the new, operator-appointed board to take over the existing charter since it does not require a legal transfer of assets or special provisions to permit the automatic transfer of students, or the authorizer to dissolve the old charter and issue a new one. Alternatively, a new charter allows the restarted school to reset its school accountability status and could make the school eligible for federal start-up funds.

The best option depends on the context of the charter law where the restart is happening. Ideally, the restart operator will have the flexibility to apply the charter that provides the legal structure for the restart and creates the best environment for it.

The authorizer and new school operator should therefore have a strong understanding of the limitations and opportunities of their chartering decision from the onset of the restart process.

External Conditions to Support Restarts

As described in Part 2, restarts can pose a lot of risk for school operators. But stakeholders, including authorizers, existing boards, philanthropists, and others, can take steps to minimize those risks and create a market for qualified operators to pursue restarts. For example:

- **Make transitional funding available.** Restarts typically impose additional costs on the new school operator that are rarely anticipated in regular school budgets. For example, the operator may need to pay the incoming principal to spend time in the school and plan through spring before the restart begins, before the operator has access to the school's per-pupil funds.

Authorizers, philanthropists, board members, and policymakers can take several steps to address this funding barrier and foster conditions for a stronger charter restart market. For example, authorizers can issue new charters, rather than reauthorizing the existing charter, so that restart operators are eligible for federal Charter School Program (CSP) funds. Or, federal guidelines could change to make restarts under existing charters eligible for CSP start-up grants. Similarly, adjusting federal policy to make more charter schools eligible for SIG funding, such as by continuing the school's federal improvement status irrespective of new charter status, could help make federal funds available to support successful charter restarts. Philanthropists can provide grants to the new operator to cover transitional costs. Or, as at Harlem Day, the existing board can contract with the new operator and use existing per-pupil funds or the philanthropic dollars it raises to fund the transition.

- **Reset the school's accountability status.** Some highly successful charter operators are deterred from engaging in a restart by the prospect of assuming the failing accountability status of the school. Authorizers—such as those overseeing the charter of Power House High and Harriet Tubman—have helped to overcome this barrier by exempting the new operator from local or state accountability ratings for some period of time, or resetting the school's accountability status under a new charter.⁴⁵

That is not to say that the new operators should not be held accountable for student performance. Authorizers should take great care not to allow charter boards to use restarts solely as a means to gain more time on the accountability clock. As described in the recommendations, authorizers must set clear annual benchmarks for student progress and intervene quickly if the school does not meet those targets. But authorizers can create breathing room for the new operator during a restart transition by waiving accountability ratings for a short time, or resetting the school's accountability status.

- **Provide access to public facilities.** The absence of a suitable facility can be an issue if the low-performing charter does not have a permanent space or a long-term lease agreement, especially in cities where real estate is particularly expensive or scarce. By providing access to public facilities, districts and municipalities can create a stronger restart environment.
- **Allow students to reenroll without a lottery.** Restarts aim to provide a high-quality school option to the students already enrolled in a charter school that has fallen short of expectations. To ensure that current students can take advantage of the opportunities the restart offers, the new or revised charter should allow them to reenroll without participating in a lottery.
- **Permit the restarted school to be included in a feeder pattern for its CMO.** The operators restarting a struggling charter may already have other schools nearby serving lower or upper grades. In that case, the operator may want to build a feeder pattern, whereby students attending one of its schools can automatically enroll in the next school as they advance through grades. Policy should permit such feeder patterns.

Charter Restarts in Washington, D.C.

Charter restarts can play a valuable role advancing the quality of the charter school sector in Washington, D.C. The benefits of the charter restart strategy, highlighted on page 8 of this report, are particularly relevant to Washington, D.C., where just 55 percent of students across the district are proficient in math, and fewer than 50 percent are proficient in reading, even as 43 percent of public school students are enrolled in public charter schools.⁴⁶ Given how many students rely on charter schools to provide a high-quality education, Washington authorizers must hold school boards accountable for providing the outcomes they promised, and board members must seek help early when student performance lags. Furthermore, this charter sector exhibits many characteristics that support a charter restart strategy, including:

- **Some neighborhoods have an inadequate supply of high-performing schools.** In particular, just nine of the 25 charter schools in Wards 7 and 8 exceeded the district-wide average proficiency rate on the 2011–12 district assessment. But traditional schools in those wards performed even worse; just one out of 40 outperformed the district-wide average.⁴⁷
- **A number of high-performing charter school networks already operate in the city.** These CMOs predominantly serve low-income and minority students, and have demonstrated their capacity to achieve academic excellence on multiple campuses. They provide a potential supply of high-performing charter restart operators. Furthermore, several high-performing charter operators outside of Washington are prepared to open schools in the district. For example, Rocketship Education, a California-based CMO, has been authorized to open more than 5,000 K–5 seats starting in fall 2015.
- **The district has a high-functioning charter authorizer.** The Public Charter School Board (PCSB) has established itself as a high-performing charter authorizer willing to enforce accountability standards. It has developed annual school performance reports and has a record of closing underperforming schools—13 in the past five years.⁴⁸ The National Association of Charter School Authorizers, which is dedicated to improving public education by improving the policies and practices of the organizations responsible for authorizing charter schools, has also publicly cited the PCSB’s authorizing practices.⁴⁹

The recommendations identified in this report can apply directly to the implementation of charter restarts in Washington. The city has seen some restarts already, with Septima Clark as the most recent example, and many of the early challenges there have been consistent with the other five schools profiled in this report (see “Early Restart Efforts at Septima Clark,” page 33).

By adopting the recommendations from this report and tailoring them for the Washington charter sector, the PCSB, along with local charter boards and advocates, can establish a replicable process that could produce more high-quality school options for students. The recommendations provide a starting point for developing a proactive and transparent charter restart process that extends the range of options for effective charter governance and authorization.

Early Restart Efforts at Septima Clark

Septima Clark charter school opened in Washington, D.C., in 2006 as an all-boys school. By the 2012–13 school year, Septima Clark served boys in grades pre-K–6. The school struggled academically, and in 2010–11, it received a Tier 3 ranking on the DC Public Charter School Board’s (PCSB) Performance Management Framework, the lowest ranking, which signified inadequate performance. The school also struggled to find a permanent facility, moving three times in five years.

When planning for its annual retreat in April 2012, the board planned to focus on the facility issue, but shifted its focus from facility challenges to a rigorous assessment of its academic performance. The school’s low performance had become a barrier to getting a much-needed facility loan because charter schools that receive three Tier 3 rankings within a five-year period are subject to charter revocation. Although the school was in a difficult situation because its current lease was due to expire in June 2013, the key to securing a new facility was higher student performance.

By the end of the meeting, board members agreed to look into a possible restart while implementing an internal turnaround for the time being. They also established a task force, headed by the board chair, to oversee and evaluate turnaround options and to report back to the board with a recommendation by the new year. The task force engaged a local education management consulting firm to provide strategic advice and help monitor the progress of internal turnaround efforts. Although 2011–12 academic results (released in fall 2012) showed improvements, the board task force identified a wide range of concerns around school performance and sustainability indicating that internal turnaround efforts were not sufficient, especially compared with the benefits of a restart with a high-performing charter school.

Choosing an Operator

In the fall, the board task force worked with a consulting firm to identify and vet three prospective operators. Although the task force did not use a formal request for proposal process, it provided an information packet to each potential operator and asked each to share a proposal in return. After interviewing all three candidates, the board selected Achievement Prep. Achievement Prep already operated a 4–8 charter school in Washington’s Ward 8 neighborhood, where Septima Clark was located. Better yet, it was a high-performing Tier 1 school where more than 90 percent of students were proficient in reading by seventh grade, and 100 percent were proficient in math.⁵⁰ In addition, Achievement Prep could offer something the other applicants could not—a facility solution for Septima Clark students.

Achievement Prep was already planning to expand into lower elementary grades for the 2013–14 school year. The Septima Clark restart therefore offered an opportunity to serve students who would otherwise be displaced by a school closure, while establishing a proof point for charter restarts in Washington. Septima Clark also had a significant fund balance that Achievement Prep could spend on the school’s academic program.

The restart at Septima Clark differs from the other restarts highlighted in this report because it more closely resembles a traditional school closure. All Septima Clark students whose parents chose to enroll them at Achievement Prep are guaranteed seats. Nonetheless, as a result of the restart, the Septima Clark charter will be dissolved, and students will be required to move to a new school building and integrate with an existing student population (including a coed learning environment.) But the restart offers all of the Septima Clark students a seat at Achievement Prep, something they would not have without the restart structure.

Preparing for the Restart

In early February 2013, the Septima Clark and Achievement Prep boards submitted a joint proposal to the PCSB that facilitated the dissolution of the Septima Clark charter, transferred all of Septima Clark’s assets and liabilities to Achievement Prep, and allowed Achievement Prep to accept transfer enrollments of Septima Clark students. The proposal included a detailed description of the rationale, benefits, and transition plan for the transaction. As part of the transaction, Achievement Prep also agreed to offer all Septima Clark staff members first-round interviews for positions at the school, although few accepted the offer and just one teacher will make the move to Achievement Prep.

Septima Clark parents did not learn about the restart decision until the board was about to submit the proposal to PCSB. At that time, parents were not aware that school closure was a possibility, either as a consequence of low academic performance or the lack of a suitable facility. Consequently, the decision to restart the school with Achievement Prep as the new operator came as a shock to most. Furthermore, Septima Clark's founder and head of school did not support the restart decision and resigned shortly before the board announced the decision to parents, causing greater confusion and distrust. News of the restart was even more difficult for parents when they learned that their children would have to attend school in a different building a few miles away. That left parents very frustrated, and Achievement Prep struggled to engage the families as hoped, despite holding community meetings that focused on the opportunities students would have at Achievement Prep.

Early Results

The Septima Clark restart is still a work-in-progress, and will not be implemented fully until the summer of 2013. Approximately 43 percent of the eligible students from Septima Clark were enrolled at Achievement Prep for the 2013–14 school year as of the April 30 deadline.



Conclusion

Data from more than a decade show how dramatically charter schools vary in quality. Some are undeniably great, but when charter schools underperform and fall short of their goals and expectations, it becomes critical to honor our commitment to students and hold schools accountable for doing more.

Charter restarts hold compelling promise for providing students with a high-quality educational option when their current charter school does not, and surrounding schools offer no better. When the conditions are right, a new school operator and new board can dramatically improve academic outcomes. And when charter school boards can reflect on their struggles and proactively pursue a restart strategy, students get the opportunity to improve even more quickly.



Notes

1. See, for example: Osborne, D. (2012). *Improving charter school accountability: The challenge of closing failing schools*. Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute. Retrieved from http://progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/06.2012-Osborne_Improving-Charter-School-Accountability_The-Challenge-of-Closing-Failing-Schools.pdf; Stuit, D. A. (2010). *Are bad schools immortal?* Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/are-bad-schools-immortal.html>; Hassel, B. C., & Batdorff, M. (2004). *High stakes: Findings from a national study of life-or-death decision by charter school authorizers*. Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact. Retrieved from <http://www.publicimpact.com/images/stories/publicimpact/documents/highstakes.pdf>

2. de la Torre, M., & Gwynne, J. (2009). *When schools close: Effects on displaced students in Chicago Public Schools*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research. Retrieved from <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/when-schools-close-effects-displaced-students-chicago-public-schools>

3. Other terms may be used to describe the same strategy, including “restructured renewal” in New York. This report focuses on the characteristics that separate restarts from other strategies for addressing chronic underperformance at charter schools. Under the federal School Improvement Grant program, the term “restart” refers to a charter takeover of a low-performing *district* school. This report, however, focuses on a new charter operator and board assuming the management and governance of an *existing, low-performing charter school*.

For more on restarts as defined in this report, see: Hassel, E. A. & Hassel, B. (2009). The big U-turn. *Education Next*. 9(1). Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/the-big-uturn/>; *Starting fresh in low-performing schools*. Chicago, IL: National Alliance of Charter School Authorizers. Retrieved from http://www.qualitycharters.org/images/stories/Starting_Fresh_Series.pdf; Steiner, L., & Hassel, B. (2008). *Salvaging assets: Considering alternatives to school closure*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from http://crpe.edgateway.net/cs/crpe/download/csr_files/wp_ncsrp09_salvaging_apr08.pdf; Hassel, B. C., & Steiner, L. (2003). *Starting fresh: A new strategy for responding to chronically low-performing schools*. Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact. Retrieved from <http://publicimpact.com/images/stories/publicimpact/documents/startingfresh.pdf>

4. “Same students” refers to the students who were enrolled at the charter school the previous year, and would have been eligible to enroll again the following year. This does not include students who graduated from the charter school, or new students who might have enrolled for the first time. This definition also leaves open the possibility that the restart expands the student population served to include new grades, or eliminates grades as the original students move up.

5. National Alliance of Public Charter Schools. (n.d.). *Students eligible for free or reduced price lunch*. Retrieved from <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/students/page/lunch/year/2012>

6. For example, one research study showed that across KIPP's 43 middle schools nationally, KIPP students achieved at a higher level than they would have achieved in nearby district schools across all four of the academic subjects examined, in each of the first four years after enrollment, and for all measurable student subgroups. Tuttle, C. G., Gill, B., Gleason, P., Knechtel, V., Nichols-Barrer, I., & Resch, A. (2013, February 27). *KIPP middle schools: Impacts on achievement and other outcomes*. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research. Retrieved from http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/Education/KIPP_Middle.pdf

7. For example, in Texas, YES Prep graduates a greater percentage of students overall as well as in low-income and minority subgroups than schools statewide, and students from its senior classes have gained admission to more than 250 colleges and universities nationwide. Yes Prep. *Results*. Retrieved from <http://yesprep.org/about/results>

8. Center for Research Education Outcomes. (2009). *Multiple choice: Charter school performance in 16 states*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. Retrieved from http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf

9. Klein, A. (2012, November 19). Ed. Dept. analysis paints mixed picture of SIG program. *Education Week*. Retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2012/11/initial_school_improvement_ana.html; Kowal, J., & Hassel, E. A. (Public Impact). (2011). *Importing leaders for school turnarounds: Lessons and opportunities*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia's Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education. Retrieved from http://www.darden.virginia.edu/web/uploadedFiles/Darden/Darden_Curry_PLE/UVA_School_Turnaround/Importing_Leaders_for_School_Turnarounds.PDF; Smarick, A. (2010). The turnaround fallacy. *Education Next*. 10(1). Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/the-turnaround-fallacy/>; Loveless, T. (2010). *The 2009 Brown Center report on American education: How well are American students learning?* Houston, TX: The Brown Center on Education Policy. Retrieved from http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2010/3/17%20education%20loveless/0317_education_loveless.pdf

10. See, for example: Osborne. (2012). *Improving charter school accountability*; Stuit. (2010). *Are bad schools immortal?*; Hassel & Batdorff. (2004). *High stakes*.

11. de la Torre & Gwynne. (2009). *When schools close*.

12. Under the federal School Improvement Grant program, both the "turnaround" and "transformation" models would meet this definition.

13. "Same students" refers to the students who were enrolled at the charter school the previous year, and would have been eligible to enroll again the following year. This does not include students who graduated from the charter school, or new students who might have enrolled for the first time.

This definition also leaves open the possibility that the restart expands the student population served to include new grades, or eliminates grades as the original students move up.

14. Hassel & Hassel. (2009). *The big U-turn*.

15. Beer, M., & Nohria, N. (2000). *Breaking the code of change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

16. Stuit. (2010). *Are bad schools immortal?*

17. Hassel & Hassel. (2009). *The big U-turn*.

18. Peyser, J. A., & Marino, M. (2010). Why good authorizers should close bad schools. In K. Wechtenhiser, A. Wade, & M. Lin (Eds.), *Accountability in action: A comprehensive guide to charter school closure* (pp. 3–10). Chicago, IL: National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Retrieved from http://www.qualitycharters.org/images/stories/publications/2010_NACSA_Closure_Guide.pdf

19. See, for example: Ozek, U., Hansen, M., & Gonzalez, T. (2012). *A leg up or a boot out? Student achievement and mobility under school restructuring*. Washington, DC: CALDER. Retrieved from <http://www.caldercenter.org/publications/upload/wp78.pdf>; de la Torre & Gwynne. (2009). *When schools close*.

20. Brinson, D., & Steiner, L. (2012). *Building family and community demand for dramatic change in schools*. Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact. Retrieved from http://publicimpact.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/building_demand_for_dramatic_change_in_schools-public_impact.pdf

21. Other terms may be used to describe the same strategy, including "restructured renewal" in New York. This report focuses on the characteristics that separate restarts from other strategies for addressing chronic underperformance at charter schools. Under the federal School Improvement Grant program, the term "restart" refers to a charter takeover of a low-performing district school. This report, however, focuses on a new charter operator and board assuming the management and governance of an existing, low-performing charter school. For more on restarts as defined in this report, see: Public Impact. (2009). *Starting fresh in low-performing schools*. Chicago, IL: National Alliance of Charter School Authorizers. Retrieved from http://www.qualitycharters.org/images/stories/Starting_Fresh_Series.pdf; Steiner, L., & Hassel, B. (2008). *Salvaging assets: Considering alternatives to school closure*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from http://crpe.edgateway.net/cs/crpe/download/csr_files/wp_ncsrp09_salvaging_apr08.pdf; Hassel, B. C., & Steiner, L. (2003). *Starting fresh: A new strategy for responding to chronically low-performing schools*. Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact. Retrieved from <http://publicimpact.com/images/stories/publicimpact/documents/startingfresh.pdf>

22. Specifically, some interviewees for this report contended that the outgoing school board should have no say in the restart design, especially with respect to selecting the new

operator, and that no one on the outgoing school board should serve on the new school board.

23. Ozek, Hansen, & Gonzalez. (2012). *A leg up or a boot out?*; de la Torre & Gwynne. (2009). *When schools close*.

24. See for example: Lazarin, M. (2011). *Charting new territory: Tapping charter schools to turn around the nation's dropout factories*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. Retrieved from http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/06/pdf/charter_schools.pdf; Merseth, K. K. (2010). *High-performing charter schools: Serving two masters?* In R. L. Lake (Ed.), *Hopes, fears, & reality: A balanced look at American charter schools in 2009*. Bothell, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/pub_ch3_hfr09_jan10_0.pdf; Izumi, L. T. (2008). *What works: Inside model charter schools*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation and Improvement. Retrieved from <http://www.centerii.org/search/resources/whatworksmodelcharter.pdf>

25. We followed a two-step process to identify the five schools. First, we developed a list of all possible leads by reaching out to experts and practitioners in the field and by conducting Internet searches. From that, we generated more than 20 leads. We researched the 20 leads and identified five schools that met our restart criteria—change in operator, change in governance, same students served—and where low student performance motivated the restart (in contrast to restarts that have been initiated due to fiscal and/or operational mismanagement). For each school, we aimed to speak with at least two people involved in the restart, including the new operator and someone from the authorizer's office or an original board member. Altogether, we conducted more than a dozen interviews to learn how the restart process unfolded at the five schools.

26. Mass Insight Education and Research Institute & NewSchools Venture Fund. (2006). *Considering school turnarounds: Market research and analysis*. Boston, MA: Mass Insight Education. Retrieved from http://www.newschools.org/files/ConsideringSchoolTurnarounds_0.pdf

27. The board at Power House High is still largely the same, but will dissolve after three years when the transition is complete and the Noble Network takes full control of all grades at the school. At Paul Robeson, the school founder serves on the board of the restarted school. She did not serve on the school board before the restart, however.

28. Although the school's founder became part of the new board, she did not serve on the original Paul Robeson Charter School board. As a result, 100 percent of the original board members technically turned over.

29. A subset of the 2011–12 PHH board and one representative from the Noble Network currently govern the school and will continue to do so until the transition is complete

in 2015–16. At that time, a local, network-wide board will govern the restarted high school.

30. Although Harriet Tubman was the first school in the Crescent City Schools (CCS) network, a network-wide board governs all of its schools.

31. Each of Mastery's 11 charter schools has its own board, including Hardy Williams. However, the same individuals serve on all 11 boards. So although Hardy Williams technically has a school-level board, in practice it resembles a network-wide board. In addition, Hardy Williams has an active parent's association with representation on Mastery's network-wide Parent Advisory Group. Parents select two to three members of the Parents Advisory Group to serve on Mastery's 11 school boards.

32. Martinez, B. (2011, June 30). School braces for hard truth. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304450604576416020909085998.html>

33. The charter governing Henry Ford Academy: Power House High has not changed. A network-wide charter governs DRW Trading: College Prep, however, and will govern the fully restarted school once the transition is complete in 2015–16.

34. Power House High became two schools when the restart began in 2012–13. The lower school, enrolling just ninth-graders in the first year, is an official Noble Network campus, governed by the CMO's board under a network-wide charter. Grades 10–12 look and feel like a Noble Network campus, and a Noble Network principal under contract with the Power House High board runs it, but HFLI of Illinois will continue to hold the charter; the existing board, which now includes a Noble Network representative, will hold the charter for three years, when the last of the school's original students graduate.

35. In New York, the authorizer uses the term "restructured renewal," which meets our definition for a restart. We therefore refer to the change effort at Harlem Day as a restart throughout this report.

36. The original board at Harriet Tubman rarely allowed Crescent City Schools access to the building or staff before the board members were removed.

37. Mastery became the "active manager" at Hardy Williams Charter School in March 2011, taking over the school's daily management and the board. Given the midyear transition, however, Mastery largely used this time to assess staff and audit operations, holding off on more substantial changes until the following fall.

38. New York City Department of Education. (n.d.). *NYC school survey 2011–12 report: Harlem Prep Charter School*. Retrieved from http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2011-12/Survey_2012_M708.pdf

39. Democracy Prep. (n.d.). *Harlem Prep Elementary School: About*. Retrieved from <http://democracyprep.org/schools/about/harlem-prep-elementary-school>; NYC Department of Education. (n.d.). *Find a progress report* [searched for progress reports for Harlem Prep Charter School]. Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/report/FindAProgressReport/default.htm>
40. NYC Department of Education. (n.d.). *Find a progress report*.
41. Analysis compares growth between 2007–08 to 2009–10, the years Algiers Charter School Association ran the school and a performance score was reported, to the growth from 2009–10 to 2011–12, when Crescent City Schools took over the school. The state did not calculate a performance score for 2010–11. The state also did not calculate a schoolwide performance score for Harriet Tubman between 2004 and 2007. Louisiana Department of Education. *Archived school performance score data*. Retrieved from <http://www.louisianabelieves.com/data/sps/>
42. Analysis compares 2010–11 performance to 2011–12 performance. Pennsylvania Department of Education. (2011). *Charter annual report*. Retrieved from http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/document/1256575/hardy_williams_academy_cs-charter_annual_report-approved_2010_report_pdf; Pennsylvania Department of Education. (n.d.). *Academic achievement report: 2011–2012, AYP facts*. Retrieved from <http://paayp.emetric.net/>
43. Data from Power House High principal [Personal correspondence], May 6, 2013.
44. Data from Scholar Academies [Personal correspondence], May 9, 2013.
45. CCS received a Type 5 charter from the Recovery School District, which granted CCS the ability to take over a failing school. As a Type 5 charter, Harriet Tubman's accountability status reset when CCS restarted the school, and received a yearlong reprieve from receiving a letter grade from the state. At Henry Ford Academy: Power House High, HFLI of Illinois received a two-year extension of the existing charter contract without performance review in exchange for committing to voluntarily return the charter to Chicago Public Schools at the end of the 2014–15 school year.
46. The District of Columbia. (2012). *Mayor Vincent C. Gray announces 2012 DC CAS results* [Press release]. Retrieved from <http://osse.dc.gov/release/mayor-vincent-c-gray-announces-2012-dc-cas-results>
47. The District of Columbia. (2012). *Mayor Vincent C. Gray announces 2012 DC CAS results*.
48. PCSB. [n.d.]. *PCSB annual reports*. Retrieved from <http://www.dcpubliccharter.com/About-the-Board/PCSB-Annual-Reports.aspx>
49. National Alliance of Public Charter Schools. (2012). National survey shows charter school closure rates dropped in 2010–11 school year. Retrieved from http://www.qualitycharters.org/images/stories/Press_Releases/2011_Facts_Report_Release_-_013012.pdf
50. See performance results charts at <http://aprepacademy.org/performance-by-grade-level.html>