

# From Pandemic to Progress

Eight Education Pathways for COVID-19 Recovery

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## ***Building on the Charter Sector's Many Paths to Impact***

Charter schools empower families who want something for their children other than their zoned neighborhood school. Many charter schools, especially those in urban communities, have provided those options while helping high-need students achieve remarkable levels of growth and proficiency. But the charter sector is far from perfect, and its growth has slowed as challenges in the sector have proved persistent and political opposition has gained purchase in the zeitgeist of education politics. As a result, charter schools and their champions cannot rely solely on enrollment growth as their path to impact in the coming years.

The sector can and should grow in other ways, however. In the years ahead, the charter sector should redouble efforts to improve school quality, foster a diversity of school models, and support dynamic new operators responsive to community and family needs — all while serving as an incubator for new solutions to long-standing problems.

**In the wake of COVID-19, the charter sector needs higher-quality schools, diverse educational models, and dynamic new operators — and should incubate more solutions to long-standing problems.**

*From Pandemic to Progress* puts forth eight ambitious but achievable pathways that leaders and policymakers can follow to rebuild education — and student learning and well-being — as the country begins to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. To read more from this series, visit [www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress](http://www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress).

## Charter supporters have reasons to be pessimistic.

Charter schools should expect to face new headwinds. The Biden administration has indicated it wants to use the federal purse strings to put [new limits](#) on current and new charter schools, and Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, while not a vocal opponent of charter schools, is also hardly their champion. Cardona will oversee the federal Charter Schools Program, an [essential source of dollars](#) for the launch and expansion of charter schools.

Meanwhile, as the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic continues to [impact state revenues](#), charter schools will be vulnerable to budget cuts. Because charter schools rarely have access to local revenue, they already receive less per-pupil funding than district schools. Moreover, charter schools often depend on state grant or loan programs to access facilities; as line items in state budgets, it is easier to cut these programs than to revisit school funding formulas.

In the face of these headwinds, charter schools and their champions must maintain a full court press for adequate funding, access to facilities, strong accountability, and the ability to operate and innovate free of bureaucracy and undue regulation. But it would be naive to think that the charter sector will recapture the fast growth and highly replicable models of its early years. Instead, sector leaders can deepen and extend charter school impact in other ways.

## The charter sector has many paths to impact.

In the absence of rapid growth, the strategies below will help ensure that the charter sector continues to grow its impact and is even stronger in the future than it is today.

### The charter sector should continue to improve school quality.

Charter school performance has been [improving over time](#), but there are still far too many charter schools falling short of their promises to students and families. [Pockets of weak performance](#) in the charter sector can and must be addressed — including the overall abysmal results of virtual charter schools, geographic areas of underperformance and lax oversight, and too many schools struggling to successfully serve students with disabilities or English language learners.

Improving school quality requires programmatic and operational support to help address these stubborn weaknesses. Schools that have achieved exemplary outcomes can support sector-wide improvement by sharing their practices broadly, enabling struggling schools to adapt effective practices to their own needs and contexts. Charter school associations, incubators, and funders can redirect some of the resources they previously have spent pursuing rapid growth to focus on supporting the improvement of existing schools.

Charter school authorizers must also fully live up to the promise of accountability, including closing schools that persistently fall short of authorizer and family expectations. At the same time, how authorizers close a school also matters tremendously. Authorizers need to practice consistent transparency, communication, and family engagement so there is a strong foundation of community trust before they make difficult decisions. They must also help families smoothly transition to higher-quality options. State policymakers must ensure authorizers have the adequate resources to do so.

Improving the consistency of charter school quality will allow charter champions to say – with fewer caveats and asterisks – that charter schools are offering students a higher-quality education than they would otherwise have access to.

### **The charter sector should foster a diversity of school models.**

As [my colleagues and I wrote in September](#), the charter sector has an opportunity to foster a diversity of school models that can meet the varied needs and preferences of a large and pluralistic country. But these models need room to operate.

Unfortunately, some authorizing practices can hinder nontraditional schools' efforts to open and expand. Authorizers may simply be unfamiliar with the model or its benefits, or not know that the model is misaligned to the authorizer's rubrics for assessing school performance. For instance, students in a dual-language immersion program may develop proficiency in English language arts (ELA) at a slower rate than students who are not in such a program (research shows that dual-language students catch up to other students after a few years). Authorizers may see lower ELA test scores and flag it as an artifact of poor school quality rather than a manifestation of the school's particular model. Misalignments like this may seem small on their own, but they accumulate to limit the diversity of options available to families.

There are numerous ways in which authorizers, funders, and other charter support organizations can foster a diversity of school models. Authorizers can proactively encourage applications from the leaders of nontraditional schools and build relationships with school leaders to lay a foundation for open communication about their models and the school's performance. They can work with measurement and evaluation experts to understand how success might look different for some models than for others. And they can augment or adjust standard performance metrics to capture additional dimensions of school quality without lowering the bar.

Funders and other charter support organizations also have a role. They can provide financial and expert support to nontraditional schools during start-up, helping school leaders define and codify their models, plan for and address potential hurdles in the charter application process, and effectively communicate with stakeholders about what makes the school different and why it matters. They can also facilitate collaboration between school leaders and authorizers so each can learn from and build on the experiences of their peers.

**The charter sector should ensure a dynamism that is responsive to the needs and preferences of families and communities.**

A small number of large charter networks drove significant growth in the charter sector over the past 25 years. Data today shows this is beginning to change. Between 2013 and 2017, the percent of new charter applications from free-standing schools (not associated with a charter management organization or an education management organization) has [ticked up](#) from 51% to 55%. Moreover, the average size of a charter network today is quite small. During the [2018-19 school year](#), just 14 charter management organizations (CMOs) had 26 or more schools, while 144 CMOs had just three to five schools in their networks.

The significant number of independently operated schools and small CMOs demonstrates the potential for nascent operators to enter the sector and gain traction alongside large, long-established, and well-known networks. While there's nothing wrong with large CMOs — many have achieved laudable outcomes for kids — the plethora of smaller players is nonetheless encouraging for sector dynamism. It guards against a monolithic sector and keeps pressure on established actors to continuously evolve and improve.

The growth of independently operated schools and small networks is also encouraging because these schools and networks are often founded and led by leaders who are embedded in the communities they seek to serve. If there's one lesson of the past decade of the charter sector, it's that authentic and sustained investment in and from the community is essential to school success. Too many networks have sought to expand into new regions without investing sufficiently in engaging the local community, seeking family input, or building stakeholder support. Independently operated schools and small networks are uniquely positioned to drive sector growth while also developing schools that are responsive to community needs.

Authorizers, advocates, and funders must support the growth of these independently operated schools and small charter networks. Authorizers and advocates can do so by assessing authorizer processes and state policies to ensure they are hospitable to new entrants in the sector and are not designed to advantage established networks. In supporting the start-up of new schools, funders must also reach out beyond the usual suspects and invest in leaders they may not have worked with before and who may be trying something for the very first time.

**The charter sector should incubate new solutions to intractable problems.**

Efforts to foster collaboration between the charter and district sectors have had limited success. But fatalism about charter-district collaboration ignores the reality that the charter sector is sharing innovations with the broader field *in a different form*. As my former colleague [Alison Fuller and I have explained](#), some of the most successful CMOs have incubated promising solutions to some of the most stubborn challenges in education.

Some CMOs, like Match in Boston and High Tech High in San Diego, have developed educator training programs. Aspire Public Schools developed and spun out Schoolzilla, a platform that 100 districts and schools across 30 states now use to capture and analyze student data. Green Dot Public Schools, meanwhile, incubated United Parents and Students, an independent nonprofit working to give families a voice in local advocacy. These are just some examples of how the charter sector has developed programs, tools, and approaches that hold promise for the broader field. Continuing to encourage the incubation of these solutions will help the sector extend its impact far beyond the number of students enrolled in charter schools.

Charter school and network leaders, advocates, and funders must be intentional in spotting opportunities for extending the sector's impact beyond growing enrollment. Funders must lend financial resources to support the early stages of start-ups and spin-offs that turn these opportunities into independent offerings. And advocates must help others understand the value of the solutions generated by charter school operators and the role of the charter sector in driving entrepreneurial solutions.

### **The coming years offer an opportunity for the charter sector to better meet the needs of children and families.**

As the country begins to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, the charter sector may not have achieved the market saturation that its leaders envisioned a decade ago. But rapid enrollment growth is not the only form of impact. In fact, charter schools and their champions can and should look for other kinds of impact, including improving the schools and the sector we have today. Doing so will help create a sector with more consistent quality, a diversity of models, and a dynamism driven by local leaders and small or independent operators. Even more, it can create a sector that incubates solutions to broader challenges in the education landscape.

To read more from this series, visit [www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress](http://www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress).

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## **About Bellwether Education Partners**

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice. Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.