

National **Charter School**
Resource Center

Incubating High-Quality Charter Schools

Innovations in
City-Based Organizations



City-Based Strategies Series

BY JOE ABLEIDINGER AND LUCY STEINER 2011

About This Series

In May 2011, the National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC) and the U.S. Department of Education hosted a full-day conference to explore emerging city-based movements that embrace high-quality charter schools as an integral component of their reform strategies. This series of papers aims to continue the discussions from that day by taking a deeper look into three of the topics raised at the conference—city-based funding strategies, building a robust pipeline of talented teachers and leaders, and innovation in incubating new charter schools. Attendees at the conference represented a number of stakeholder groups, but everyone who participated shared a common goal—improving the quality of public education for all students in urban areas. The audience for this series of white papers is similarly united around that central mission and committed to working in partnership with leaders from various sectors. Readers may represent a range of roles: leaders from the charter school community, federal and state policymakers, urban school district leaders, and representatives from foundations, the business community, and community-based or civic organizations in urban areas.

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Introduction

At a time when national education reforms and dramatic state-level legislative changes are driving much of the debate about how best to improve the nation's lowest performing schools, city-based organizations remain a powerful tool to capitalize on national and state-level reform efforts and spur meaningful change in public education.

The ultimate aim of many city-based reform initiatives is to develop and grow high-quality school options for underserved students within their borders. In this white paper, we look in particular at how the members of a national network of city-based organizations—the Cities for Education Entrepreneurship Trust—are using one promising approach to creating high-quality school options: charter school incubation.

The Cities for Education Entrepreneurship Trust (CEE-Trust) and Charter Incubation

Indianapolis-based education reform organization The Mind Trust launched CEE-Trust in June 2010, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and The Joyce Foundation.¹ The network's 18 current members include mayors' offices, city-based education reform organizations, and foundations (see Table 1). All were selected on the basis of their interest in and track record of developing and leading change efforts in their cities (E. Gray, personal communication, June 17, 2011; Gose, 2010; Wall, 2010). Each member brings a slightly different perspective and agenda to the network. All are united in their belief in the unique and valuable role city-based organizations can play in coordinating and championing cities' education innovation and reform. According to Ethan Gray, vice president of The Mind Trust and director of CEE-Trust: "The goal of our work through CEE-Trust is to ensure that cities around the country have local institutional champions that drive the education reform agenda forward. We believe that city-based organizations are an under-tapped resource, and can be better leveraged to align key constituents to support education innovation and reform" (Splashlife, 2011).

Table 1. CEE-Trust Member Organizations as of August 2011

Arizona Community Foundation	Phoenix, Arizona
Blue Ridge Foundation New York	Brooklyn, New York
Charter School Partners	Minneapolis, Minnesota
Donnell-Kay Foundation	Denver, Colorado
Thomas B. Fordham Institute	Dayton, Ohio
Hyde Family Foundations	Memphis, Tennessee
Innovative Schools	Wilmington, Delaware
Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation	Kansas City, Missouri
The Mind Trust	Indianapolis, Indiana
Newark Charter School Fund	Newark, New Jersey
New Schools for New Orleans	New Orleans, Louisiana

Office of the Mayor	Sacramento, California
Office of the Mayor	Nashville, Tennessee
Office of the Mayor	St. Louis, Missouri
Rhode Island Mayoral Academies	Providence, Rhode Island
Rodel Foundation of Delaware	Wilmington, Delaware
The Skillman Foundation	Detroit, Michigan
Teaching Trust	Dallas, Texas

CEE-Trust Activities

CEE-Trust member organizations jointly engage in reform on three levels:

- **Facilitating the launch or growth of entrepreneurial education ventures** in member cities, including by linking successful entrepreneurs in one city with potential sources of support in other cities to drive expansion.
- **Partnering on collaborative projects** to accelerate innovation and reform.
- **Sharing best practices and lessons learned** at network gatherings and through CEE-Trust's documentation of member activities.

Charter Incubation Working Group

Through its collaboration and sharing, CEE-Trust recognized the need for a working group to help its members explore the topic of charter school incubation: building the supply of high-quality charter schools and charter management organizations without engaging directly in school management. In the spring of 2011, interested members formed the **CEE-Trust Charter Incubation Working Group**. Its members include the nation's most experienced charter incubators from member cities, as well as several organizations actively engaged in starting incubation efforts, others considering incubation, and several outside incubators affiliated with CEE-Trust members (see Table 2).

Table 2. CEE-Trust Charter Incubation Working Group Members and Incubation Activities

<p>New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) has launched 13 schools in the past four years. In the first two years of its incubation program, it recruited, selected, and trained aspiring charter founders over a yearlong fellowship program. NSNO has now increased the program's focus on supporting the expansion of the city's highest performing existing charter schools. Over the next five years, NSNO aims to launch 19 more schools. See http://newschoolsforneworleans.org/.</p>
<p>Charter School Partners (CSP, Minneapolis) supports start-up schools and offers a competitive fellowship for high-potential instructional leaders seeking to start high-performing charters in Minnesota. For two years leading up to a school's opening, CSP provides fellows with local charter expertise, enhanced instructional leadership, organizational leadership skills, and a strong network of community supporters. CSP's first two fellows will open schools in 2013. See http://charterschoolpartners.org/.</p>

Tennessee Charter School Incubator (TCSI) will contract with two leading fellowship programs—Building Excellent Schools and 4.0 Schools—to train school leaders. TCSI will help new school leaders manage school-launch activities in areas including talent recruitment, board development and training, facilities technical assistance, capacity building services, and funding. TCSI plans to launch 22 new schools in Nashville and Memphis over the next four years. See <http://www.charterexcellence.org/>.

Get Smart Schools, an affiliate of the Donnell-Kay Foundation (Denver), prepares and supports talented leaders to open and manage high-performing, autonomous schools including charters, and works to create conditions for these schools to thrive. Get Smart Schools is developing targeted leadership training programs, increasing resources available to new school developers, building awareness of the need for new high-performing schools, and ensuring that schools in the Get Smart Schools network maintain high standards. See <http://www.getsmartschools.org/>.

Innovative Schools (Delaware) runs the Delaware Leadership Project. Beginning in 2011, the project will attract, develop, graduate, place, and support an elite cohort of outstanding school leaders each year. All leaders will have rich skill sets and reflexes to meet the complex challenges of leading schools, including charter schools, that serve low-income communities. See <http://innovativeschools.org/>.

The Skillman Foundation (Detroit) supports the Michigan Future High School Accelerator, which recruits and selects leaders to open small, project-based high schools (charter and district) serving Detroit students. During a one-year fellowship, leaders receive assistance preparing to open and run their schools. School leaders receive \$800,000 for their schools over a three-year period. The accelerator opened its first school in 2010, with four schools opening in the fall of 2011. See <http://www.skillman.org/>.

Rhode Island Mayoral Academies (RIMA) is advancing a human capital strategy for a statewide network of high-performing charter schools known as “mayoral academies.” It works to attract successful school operators to Rhode Island and recruits visionary leaders to carry new schools through the critical start-up period and beyond. RIMA offers services to mayoral academy leadership teams that include start-up funds and support, facilities assistance, advocacy, and support in teacher and leader recruitment. See <http://www.mayoralacademies.org/>.

Thomas B. Fordham Institute has authorized seven charter schools in Ohio and wants to add new schools to its portfolio. It plans to incubate individuals with the capacity to start and sustain academically high-performing schools in underserved communities. See <http://www.edexcellence.net/>.

The Mind Trust (TMT, Indianapolis) is in the early design stage of a new charter school incubator with a goal of rapidly expanding the supply of best-in-class charter schools and charter management organizations in Indianapolis. Once launched, the incubator will conduct a highly selective, nationwide competition to identify a small group of start-up teams capable of launching networks of exceptional charter schools. TMT plans to utilize its resources to create a nationally leading package for CMO start-ups. See <http://www.themindtrust.org/>.

Charter School Supply: An Ongoing Challenge

Research has shown significant variability in charter school performance. However, the dramatic success of some charter schools and charter school networks helping disadvantaged students achieve at high levels has attracted interest in many cities from political leaders, philanthropists, district officials, parents, and other community members. Even with this growing interest, the demand for quality school options in urban areas—charter and noncharter—continues to far exceed the supply.

Many cities suffer from severe shortages of high-quality charter schools. Five charter management organizations (CMOs) widely regarded as among the best—Achievement First, Green Dot, High Tech High, KIPP, and Uncommon Schools—together reach just 48,000 students (Ryan, 2010). The top 10 percent of charter schools combined enroll just more than 160,000 students. Meanwhile, an estimated 420,000 students sit on charter school waiting lists (Rotherham, 2010).

Current efforts to scale up successful charter schools are insufficient to meet demand.

CMOs and other types of charter networks have stepped in to take successful models to scale, but few have the ambitious growth plans that would allow great models to affect dramatically more students (Hassel, Hassel, & Ableidinger, 2011; Lake, Dusseault, Bowen, Demeritt, & Hill, 2010; National Charter School Research Project, 2007). The average CMO adds a mere 1.3 schools per year. The vast majority of CMOs (70 percent) operate between two and six schools. Only 15 CMOs operate more than 10 schools, and many CMOs have no intention of ever doing so. Moreover, CMOs are not evenly distributed, with two thirds of all CMOs in just five states—California, Texas, Arizona, Ohio, and Illinois. In 2008, nearly half of all states with charter laws did not have any CMOs (Lake et al., 2010). Although some successful charter schools and CMOs could grow much more rapidly, current growth plans will leave many students without access to top-notch charter schools (Hassel et al., 2011).

Emerging Solution: Charter School Incubation

Charter school incubators are specifically designed to address cities' need for more high-quality charter options. Incubators take a variety of different approaches but generally focus on some combination of these core activities: the recruitment, selection, training, support, evaluation, and monitoring of promising charter leaders as they progress through the process of founding and opening new charter schools. The handful of incubators in operation across the country offer leaders intensive support, technical assistance, help in securing funding, and expertise in locating facilities or obtaining facilities financing. Interviews with established incubators suggest that investing in school leaders through incubation can help dramatically increase the supply of talented individuals who are prepared to lead high-quality charter schools, facilitating rapid growth of the sector.

CEE-Trust Charter Incubators' Defining Characteristics

The **charter incubators** included in the CEE-Trust Charter Incubation Working Group recruit, select, train, support, evaluate, and monitor promising leaders as they prepare to open and run charter schools in specific geographic areas.²

Incubators are distinct from **charter management organizations** (CMOs), which engage directly in school management. City-based incubators also are distinct from **regional or national talent-building organizations** such as Building Excellent Schools and 4.0 Schools, which train and support new school leaders to open schools across a range of cities and states.

Although some CEE-Trust Working Group members provide additional services to charter schools (e.g., assistance with facilities, board development, teacher recruitment), as incubators they have the following characteristics:

- **Strategic focus on leadership development.** Incubators identify and develop promising leaders or leadership teams and help them open and operate charter schools.
- **Expertise in new starts.** Although some incubators provide ongoing services to new and established charter schools, their primary focus is on recruiting and supporting new charter school leaders.
- **Selective screening for high-potential school leaders.** Incubators typically restrict their services to a small group vetted for strong school leadership potential.
- **Accountability for leaders' success or failure.** Incubation involves an intense, direct relationship with school leaders. As a result, incubators tend to judge their own success by the performance of their incubated leaders and their schools.
- **Geographic focus.** Incubators are defined in large part by their strong ties to single localities and to networks of community-based organizations, which they use to champion and build support for new school leaders. Incubators' local ties also may help them assist school leaders in critical areas of support and technical assistance, in navigating local authorizing and political processes, and in continuing to support and monitor school leaders after their schools are open.

Four Critical Focus Areas for City-Based Charter Incubators

The experiences of these early city-based initiatives, as well as lessons learned by those within the CEE-Trust network actively attempting to start incubators, have revealed **four critical focus areas** for incubators, and have shown **innovative responses to the challenges of incubation** in each area. In the remainder of this paper, we look at the four focus areas and major lessons learned by CEE-Trust member organizations in each area.

Focus Area 1: Attracting and Developing Effective School or CMO Leaders

Incubation mainly aims to prepare promising leaders to open and successfully operate new high-quality charter schools. Although all incubators share this common goal, they approach their work differently. All incubators invest significant resources in recruiting exceptional talent through selective processes, sometimes through partnerships with talent-building organizations. Some incubators then rely on leaders to identify for themselves the supports they need to be successful, and others invest in training, support, and accountability for the leaders they bring into their programs, designing specific tools to help them be successful. Depending on their approach, incubators will find some of the following activities more desirable than others. For this reason, prospective incubators should see the following activities as more of a menu than a checklist:

- **Look to a wide range of local sources for leadership talent.** Some incubators direct their recruiting toward effective teachers and instructional leaders in existing charter schools, or to those in programmatic leadership roles within districts. Some incubators also consider those outside education with proven records of success managing people and systems. As incubated leaders open and operate new schools, their staffs will be a potential source of talent primed for leadership roles.
- **Search regionally or nationally to meet leadership talent needs.** For cities without deep local talent pools, incubation might focus, at least initially, on regional or national recruitment. **Charter School Partners**, for example, has made a strategic decision to focus on local recruitment and plans to launch a “Come Back to Minnesota” campaign to reach national talent with roots in the state. Similarly, the **Tennessee Charter School Incubator** will initially look to national pools and talent-building organizations to meet its recruitment goals, although it hopes to shift its focus eventually to growing talent locally within its schools as they develop.
- **Recruit and train leadership teams for individual schools.** Leadership development programs typically focus on individual school leaders. Another innovative approach to hiring is to recruit teams of school leaders instead. 4.0 Schools, a key strategic partner of CEE-Trust members **New Schools for New Orleans** and the **Tennessee Charter School Incubator**, will train each selected school leader to hire three members of a leadership team and will then train and support the teams and prepare them to open schools. **The Mind Trust’s** incubator will select start-up teams to launch charter school networks in Indianapolis.
- **Be willing to remove candidates who fall short.** Even the best recruitment programs will sometimes fail to screen out those who later prove to be ineffective charter leaders. Incubators invest substantial resources in prospective school leaders. However, early incubation experiences suggest that the training and planning period should be an opportunity not just to develop but also to continue vetting leaders, and to move candidates who fall shy of expectations out of the program before they open schools, where their shortcomings will hurt students. Removing those who fall short also will make room in the program for more promising candidates. 4.0 Schools will incorporate into its training model rigorous reviews following candidates’ residency periods. It anticipates that 10 percent to 20 percent of candidates will not be invited to continue after these reviews.

Focus Area 2: Partnering Strategically to Help Leaders Open and Operate High-Quality Charter Schools and CMOs

Incubators often help the promising leaders they recruit take the steps necessary to apply for charters, get their schools ready to open, and succeed in operations. To do this well, each incubator should analyze its own capacity and internal assets to determine where it can add the most value for its leaders beyond the initial recruitment phase. It also should look outside the organization, even to other cities in some cases, for strategic and operational partners, as the following strategies suggest:

- **Pool resources and share strategies and tools with other incubators, charter support organizations, and operators.** CEE-Trust’s incubation group members highlight the value of pooling resources—such as application materials, selection rubrics, and training resources—rather than individually reinventing the wheel. For example, Delaware’s **Innovative Schools**, which runs a training program to prepare principals to lead high-need schools, created its selection rubric by modifying one used by the New York City Leadership Academy. **Get Smart Schools**, a training and support program for new charter founders affiliated with CEE-Trust member the **Donnell-Kay Foundation**, has designated its selection materials and rubrics as “open source” and available for others’ use. Working group members also note the potential to realize cost savings or recruit the most sought-after experts for training by holding joint training sessions. Many incubation programs are very small, with only a few leaders trained each year. They stand to save significant sums through partnership with similar programs.
- **Match existing internal capacity with external partnerships.** Each incubator must determine what elements of a successful program can be handled with existing staff and what is best delegated to others through external partnerships. **Innovative Schools** engages school model partners Big Picture Learning, EdWorks, New Tech Network, and Expeditionary Learning to provide some training and supports to future leaders. The **Tennessee Charter School Incubator** and **New Schools for New Orleans** will partner with talent-building organizations Building Excellent Schools and 4.0 Schools to lead recruitment and selection. Some working group members, including **Charter School Partners** and **Get Smart Schools**, turn to partnerships with local universities to provide training tailored for future leaders. Several group members partner with external nonprofits such as The High Bar (governance) and Achievement Network (data-driven strategies) for specialized services.
- **Network with external partners to access teacher talent pipelines.** One of the greatest challenges for new leaders is the recruitment of high-quality teachers. By networking with external partners such as Teach for America (TFA) and The New Teacher Project (TNTP), incubators can connect new leaders with sources of promising talent as they prepare to open their schools. Several working group members partner with TFA, TNTP, and other groups that may provide leaders access to promising local or national teacher talent.

Focus Area 3: Championing School Leaders in the Community

City-based incubators often are uniquely positioned to champion school leaders in local communities. This is easiest if the new school leader is from the community, but, in many cases, this will involve introducing regional or national recruits to a local community. For both external recruits and homegrown talent, incubators often offer the following connections that help leaders thrive:

- **Build exceptional boards.** Local contacts are essential for building strong charter school boards that are able to assist the school leader with school operations and governance and able to develop positive relationships between the school and the community, as well as resolve tensions that might arise between the two. Incubators use local networks to help build strong, engaged boards. Successful incubators also work to prepare board members for effective community engagement. **New Schools for New Orleans** “used its local networks to recruit mission-aligned board members and then match them with charter founders—which allowed charter founders to begin their work with strong governance in place,” according to chief strategy officer Neerav Kingsland (personal communication, July 27, 2011).
- **Introduce leaders to communities well in advance of school opening.** Early experiences suggest that incubators should facilitate the introduction of leaders to local communities as early as possible, through networks with community-based organizations and local leaders. They also should facilitate the inclusion of communities in the vetting process for new schools opening in their neighborhoods, to pave the way for strong, long-term relations (Steiner & Brinson, 2011). In 2011, **New Schools for New Orleans** is partnering with Louisiana’s Recovery School District to launch a pilot community input process whereby communities will develop visions for school excellence, interview potential charter operators, and make recommendations to the district on which charter operators could best serve their communities (N. Kingsland, personal communication, July 27, 2011).
- **Facilitate deep and ongoing community engagement.** Partnering with community-based organizations allows incubators to place leaders in residencies and other immersive training experiences within the communities where those leaders will work. For example, **Charter School Partners** will place fellows in school-based residencies where they will serve as “school improvement coordinators” in struggling schools, with discrete goals and specific tasks for improving student achievement under the guidance of existing school leaders. Incubators can therefore play an integral role in making sure all candidates become and remain engaged in the community throughout their training and the process of opening their schools. According to Greg Thompson (personal communication, August 9, 2011), CEO of the **Tennessee Charter School Incubator**, his organization engages in grassroots efforts to help its fellows facilitate relationships with community organizations and leaders to build support for their schools.

Focus Area 4: Coordinating Advocacy to Support New Charter Leaders

Policy advocacy may not be incubators' core focus, but incubators are uniquely positioned to advocate on charter issues, and they have a vested interest in ensuring a strong charter environment for affiliated school leaders. Those who take on advocacy roles often focus on developing policy agendas, alliances, supporter networks, and public relations and messaging capacity, as follows:

- **Develop strategic partnerships.** Incubators can work with other charter advocates, charter support organizations, and charter-friendly policymakers to advocate for supportive policies—such as lifting charter caps or providing equitable funding and facilities access—that will pave the way for sector growth and ease the burden on school leaders in obtaining charters and opening new schools. These advocacy efforts also can help secure needed autonomies for charter operators, which will affect the long-term success of leaders and their schools.
- **Build coalitions among operators, authorizers, and districts.** Incubators can help their school leaders significantly by building and sustaining the relationships necessary to help charters and CMOs work together more successfully with local districts and authorizers. Three working group members—**Innovative Schools, The Skillman Foundation, and Get Smart Schools**—prepare school leaders to take on leadership positions in district and charter schools. Their partnerships with districts, charter operators, and authorizers position these organizations to facilitate joint advocacy efforts on issues of common concern.
- **Advocate for public and philanthropic funding.** Aside from policy advocacy, incubators can play crucial roles in spotlighting their successful schools and making the case to policymakers and philanthropies that investment in incubation will lead to improved student achievement, particularly for students currently attending low-performing schools. CEE-Trust and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute will release a Fall 2011 policy brief with recommendations for building environments that support incubation. CEE-Trust and Fordham have commissioned Public Impact to draft the policy brief.³
- **Publicize victories.** Building citywide supporter networks may help incubators with their advocacy efforts and help to communicate with policymakers, community members, and the media about charters and effective charter policies and initiatives. Supporter networks also can publicize the strengths of their cities' policy environments as a way to attract promising leaders and teams.

Future Directions for City-Based Organizations

CEE-Trust members have benefited by focusing on the four areas and lessons highlighted in this paper. However, other areas have proved more vexing for incubators, including the proper role of incubators in schools after they are up and running and how to sustain financial, political, and community support for charter incubation in the face of constantly shifting political and economic tides. Even in the areas highlighted here, there is room for more innovation and collaboration among those who believe in the promise of incubation. In addition, the issue of scale is a continuing challenge. As any city's charter sector expands, incubators will likely face challenges to growth, including a shortage of available facilities, difficulty tapping talent pipelines, and obstacles to identifying a ready supply of strong board members, especially if each school is required to have its own board.

In the face of these barriers, current and future incubators will themselves need to be entrepreneurial. As organizations designed to spawn innovation in their cities, charter school incubators appear well positioned to tackle these challenges with ingenuity.

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Notes

- ¹ The Mind Trust is a nonprofit organization that is building a network of education innovators and reformers to improve public education for underserved children in Indianapolis. The Mind Trust invests in promising new ideas and proven national education reform organizations, champions and supports local education entrepreneurs, and joins with state and local officials to create a strong environment for reform. Public Impact has provided research and consulting services to The Mind Trust on various initiatives, including CEE-Trust.
- ² Use of the term *incubation* has been inconsistent across the field. (Some incubation organizations also help design teams, navigate the facilities process, develop strong boards, recruit high-quality teachers, and instill a performance-driven culture.) Our definition reflects the use of the term by CEE-Trust members.
- ³ CEE-Trust and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute will release a Fall 2011 policy brief with recommendations for building environments that support incubation. CEE-Trust and Fordham have commissioned Public Impact to draft the policy brief.

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