



# “THIS IS THE BIG LEAGUES” CHARTER-LED TURNAROUND IN A NON-CHARTER WORLD

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of a wide-ranging school reform package, Tennessee’s First to the Top Act of 2010 created a new state-run Achievement School District (ASD) to oversee and turn around chronically low-performing schools. These schools in the bottom 5% on state accountability measures were removed from the control of their local education agencies and placed under the purview of the ASD, with the ambitious goal of bringing them into the top 25% of performance within five years.

The ASD’s primary approach to school turnaround was to woo high-quality charter management organizations (CMOs) and other nongovernmental organizations to run its schools, located mostly in and around Memphis. This approach was inspired by the “portfolio management” model of governance, in which the role of the district shifts from providing direct guidance and supervision of schools toward managing a portfolio of schools run by independent organizations, typically within a framework of school choice. ASD leaders worked diligently to replicate the kind of institutional environment that charters have

## KEY FINDINGS

- Due to the rules of neighborhood enrollment, ASD operators had to cope with a steady flow of new students throughout the school year, significantly weakening their ability to hone in on the learning challenges of a stable corps of students.
- Poverty, policy, and other systemic barriers to choice meant that many ASD students simply attended the school in closest proximity to their home and did not engage in an active selection process. ASD operators could not assume a student body whose families had made a conscious decision to attend their school.
- The extreme levels of special needs students, the funding model, the difficulty of leveraging economies of scale, and the perceived lack of strong external service providers, has made delivery of special education services a daunting challenge for ASD operators.
- The delicate coexistence with SCS eroded operators’ control over their environment, and required them to make painful accommodations to political resistance from a wary community.
- Operators have responded to the challenges of the ASD environment with more sophisticated school-level designs that included instructional adaptations, computer-assisted learning, additional wraparound services, and new strategies for communicating with parents and building community trust.

found conducive to their growth and development in other settings, including efforts to maximize operator autonomy, push down per pupil funding, and enable families to more effectively select among schools. Still, certain policy constraints, such as limits on school choice, were beyond the ASD's authority or ability to change. Furthermore, the ASD was committed to managing turnaround within a traditional system of neighborhood school enrollment.

High-profile CMOs have historically been reluctant to embrace school turnaround or operate in institutional environments that differ substantially from their usual

circumstances. The ASD represents a significant and much-watched effort to turn that tide. While the turnaround conditions here may have given pause to some CMOs, the ASD also presented them with a rare

opportunity to prove their mettle in a district where the leaders were strongly committed to their success and aligned to the same managerial principles.

This paper, based primarily on 140 interviews with leaders of the ASD and nine charters or independent operators, describes the turnaround environment and policy context of the ASD. It discusses how these circumstances replicate or depart from the more typical charter experience, the challenges that emerged, and how operators have responded to them.

In general, four years of experience with the ASD have revealed daunting challenges. While charter operators were not naïve about the conditions in the ASD, many did not fully anticipate how much these differences would influence their instructional and organizational designs, expand their mission, and require complex adaptations. The main findings of the paper are summarized below.

### Challenges of Neighborhood Enrollment and Constrained School Choice

Tennessee legislation required ASD schools to recruit students within the

boundaries of the school's neighborhood attendance areas, or from other low-performing priority schools. The rules of zoned neighborhood enrollment restricted charters' usual ability

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to draw from a broad pool of families. But at least as importantly, these rules also removed a significant mechanism that many charters use to create stability in their schools: control over the timing of student entry. The circumstances of high mobility that are common in poor neighborhood schools left operators to cope with new and unfamiliar students throughout a school year, and significantly weakened their ability to hone in on the learning challenges of a stable corps of students over an extended period of time. Charters in the ASD needed elaborate and multifaceted strategies to deal with this transience and a wider spectrum of student experiences and academic needs.

Relatedly, in a more open choice environment, charters are more likely to engage with students and families who voluntarily selected the school and explicitly committed to its educational approach and values. But poverty, policy, and other systemic barriers to choice meant that many ASD students simply attended the school in closest proximity to their home and did not engage in an active selection process. Charter operators found it harder to inculcate a common school culture and set of behavioral expectations among their students and families, both of which are central tenets of the larger charter movement.

### Challenges of Serving Students with Special Needs

ASD operators served a substantially higher concentration of students with special needs than was typical in other charter schools in Tennessee, and the proportion and depth of need has grown over time. Furthermore, unlike their peers elsewhere, ASD charters were fiscally responsible for neighborhood students zoned to their school, even if these students received specialized services elsewhere. Whereas traditional districts usually coordinate this work across schools to alleviate some of the financial strain and provide expertise for students with rare or severe disabilities, the ASD's commitment to charter autonomy and devolving resources to operators inhibited them from taking similar action. Charters have had to rely on a small set of external providers, including the Shelby County School (SCS) district of Memphis, to offer supports that were at least initially beyond their own capabilities to provide. ASD leaders and its operators have devoted considerable attention to addressing what has proven to be one of the most formidable financial and educational challenges in the ASD.

### Challenges of Community Resistance

Despite the ASD's considerable statutory authority, SCS retained substantial control and informal powers that made operators vulnerable to its decisions. For example, SCS exercised considerable authority on such issues as the selection of priority schools for the ASD, and made decisions that removed some charters' ability to phase in to a school one grade at a time, as many prefer to do. Numerous aspects of operators' work was also influenced by SCS's inaction on such issues as creating a common enrollment application to facilitate parental selection of schooling options, or a common accountability framework to ease requirements on charters located in both the ASD and SCS.

Furthermore, the ASD and its operators experienced a high degree of community resistance and pushback to the idea of the state removing schools from their traditional district. This made it urgent for operators, particularly those that were not from the local community, to more intentionally build strong ties to parents and the wider community. Although many operators embraced the challenge with far-ranging efforts to secure community acceptance and buy-in, these initiatives further tapped their limited organizational resources.

### ASD Operators Respond

The ASD operators initiated numerous changes and made extensive efforts to respond to the instructional and organizational demands of this turnaround environment. They reorganized assessment and instruction to provide more intensive, small group learning opportunities. Toward this end, some operators developed different strategies to better diagnose

learning needs and measure growth across cohorts of students, reorganized staffing and schedules to put multiple adults in a classroom, or introduced computer-assisted instruction. They also added or reallocated resources to expand the types of special education classrooms and services they provided, and collaborated with other operators to leverage economies of scale by sharing expertise. Operators also expanded wraparound services to address a broader array of student and family needs, and developed new strategies to communicate with parents, build a positive school culture, and generate trust in their neighborhood communities.

These adaptations are reminiscent of a handful of successful comprehensive school reform initiatives that also lacked the advantages of being schools of choice but that compensated with highly sophisticated designs

for teaching, learning, and leadership. But these adaptations and expansions come at a cost. Whereas charters are based on a system of governance designed to focus them on a circumscribed set of goals, the turnaround circumstances in the ASD caused operators to considerably stretch their boundaries and become more “goal-diffuse” organizations that in some ways resemble traditional US schools. Many ASD operators bring a tremendous amount of institutional knowledge and experience that is reflected in their passion and in thoughtful strategies to address the challenges here. If these models can be adapted to the turnaround environment of the ASD, students, families, and neighborhoods all stand to gain. But the turnaround space for charters here is indisputably different from their usual circumstances, and as such calls for a very different type of schooling operations.

## I. INTRODUCTION

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In 2010, Tennessee passed the First to the Top Act, a wide-ranging piece of legislation that set forth substantial changes affecting schools and teachers across the state. Among its many provisions, First to the Top created several remedies to address schools that chronically perform in the bottom 5% on state accountability measures, designated as “priority” schools. One major initiative was to remove a segment of these priority schools from their local education agency and place them under the purview of a new state-run turnaround district, the Achievement School District (ASD), with the ambitious goal of bringing them into the top 25% of performance within five years.

While state efforts to take over and turn around schools and districts are not new, they vary considerably in scope and style (Rutgers Institute for Education Law and Policy, 2002; Joachim & Murphy, 2013; Smith, 2015; Therriault, 2015). For example, whereas the Michigan Education Achievement Authority runs all of its schools, the ASD leaders have primarily sought to woo high-quality charter management organizations (CMOs) or other nongovernmental organizations to do so. Since its first year of operations in 2012, the ASD has taken on 29 schools but directly manages only five. The remainder are run by independent operators or charter management organizations. All but two are

currently located in the Shelby County Schools district, which includes Memphis and the surrounding suburbs.

The ASD's overall approach to improvement draws from the "portfolio management" model of governance (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010). In portfolio management the role of the district shifts from directly supervising schools toward overseeing and enforcing accountability for a portfolio of schools run by independent organizations within a school choice environment. The expectation is that school operators which are most successful in demonstrating effectiveness and engendering parental support will be permitted to grow their network of schools, while those deemed ineffective would be gradually removed (Lake & Hill, 2009). Consistent with these ideas, ASD leaders have sought to replicate the kind of environment that charters have found conducive to their growth and development, including efforts to maximize operational autonomy, push down per pupil funding, and pursue policies that would enable families to more effectively choose among schools (Glazer, Massell, & Malone, 2015).

The ASD strategy draws inspiration from New Orleans' Recovery School District (RSD), where charter organizations run the vast majority of city schools under the umbrella of state management, and where academic gains have been widely hailed if not incontrovertible (Sims & Rossmeier, 2015; Jabbar et al., 2014). There are some critical differences between these two districts, to be sure, such as their relative scale and the fact that choice is citywide in the RSD but

not the ASD. But both are high-profile cases in which charter schools and nongovernmental school operators have migrated from a traditional position on the periphery of the public system to more central roles.

Several states are now looking to duplicate these types of strategies by creating their own turnaround districts.

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Independent operators and CMOs have received substantial investments from private philanthropic and government sources that seek to increase the role of charter schools in the turnaround endeavor.

Supporting this trend is widespread political acceptance of charters and of some versions of choice as a way to address fairness and equity issues and improve failing urban schools. Advocates see choice as a means of enabling poor families to participate in higher quality institutions and promote desegregation and as an alternative to less politically palatable and more disruptive strategies such as mandatory busing (Orfield & Frankenberg 2013; McDermott, 1999).

But despite growing popularity and substantial funding from government and philanthropic sources, charters still represent only a small fraction of public schooling<sup>1</sup> and play a minor role in efforts to improve the nation's

<sup>1</sup> National estimates of charter schools range between 3-7%.

most chronically underperforming schools. This has not escaped the attention of national education leaders. In a 2009 speech, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan directly appealed to the charter movement to engage in the formidable challenge of school turnaround:

*We have great charter networks like Aspire, KIPP, Achievement First and Uncommon Schools. You're steadily getting to scale. Today, I am challenging you to adapt your educational model to turning around our lowest-performing schools. I need you to go outside your comfort zones and go to underserved rural communities and small cities. We are asking states and districts to think very differently about how they do business.*

Duncan is not alone in his effort to induce charters into the work of school turnaround. Policymakers, funders, and advocates across the country see the turnaround space as an opportunity to expand the role of charter schools, and charter schools as a way to improve the outcomes in those same schools (Bachofer, 2014). Kevin Huffman, former Tennessee Commissioner of Education, said:

*There's not enough capacity in the world for the charter sector to grow 20% a year on the backs of fresh starts [newly-created schools]. So I think there was a broad interest in the charter sector generally in figuring this out and getting better at it. But it's different work...if they can figure it out and do it well, I think they will be enthusiastic about staying the course.<sup>2</sup>*

Yet despite the encouragement of policymakers and funders, relatively few CMOs have come to embrace

this challenge. It is not difficult to understand why. The operation of turnaround schools occurs in conditions that are often fundamentally different from charters' usual operating environment. For example, whereas charters typically enjoy a wide zone of autonomy and independence, charters in turnaround environments may be more closely managed by state or local government authorities and have greater constraints on their discretion. They may be asked to assume control over existing neighborhood schools, rather than operate schools with open choice. And while typical charter contracts include some performance standards, turnaround situations can demand a rapid rise in outcomes that is extremely difficult to accomplish. Such conditions impose a set of circumstances that national CMOs have been reluctant to enter (Therriault, 2015).

In this paper, we set out to describe the conditions of the turnaround environment in Tennessee as managed by the ASD under the guidelines and constraints of its policy context. We focus on how the circumstances here replicate or depart from charters' more typical environment and set of experiences, what these differences mean, and how operators have responded to these challenges.

We draw largely from the 140 interviews that we conducted between 2013 and 2016 with leaders from the ASD and nine operators (Appendix A).

Briefly, we found that despite the ASD's substantial efforts to recreate the kind of institutional environment to which many charter schools and CMOs were accustomed, several factors greatly expanded operators' scope of work and strained their ability to plan or dedicate resources to their original vision.

These included the absence of a voluntary client

<sup>2</sup>This and all other quotes are derived from interviews conducted by the research team, unless otherwise indicated.

base with strong conditions of choice, the depth of student needs, the contentious relationship between the local school district and community, and a large degree of uncertainty in the environment. To be sure, the various organizations operating within the ASD entered with diverse experiences, frames of reference, and knowledge of the Memphis context. Under these conditions, some charter operators walked away, slowed expansion plans, or withdrew their bids for authorization. But others have persisted and adapted

to the challenges, and we seek to describe their efforts here. However, readers should note that we make no claims here about the efficacy of their efforts to resolve these challenges or their ultimate effects on student learning outcomes. Rather, we hope this discussion about the challenges and broad types of actions to address them will shed light on what policymakers, charters, and other independent operators may expect in similar terrain, and enable them to draw from the experiences and lessons learned in the ASD turnaround environment.

## II. ASD MANAGEMENT: CREATING A CHARTER-FRIENDLY TURNAROUND ENVIRONMENT

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The strategies adopted by ASD leaders adhere to many of the core convictions that gave impetus to the charter movement (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1955). These perspectives hold that despite considerable effort, public schools rarely adopt the characteristics of effective organizations under the traditional system of educational governance. They conclude that since district central offices and their elected local school boards must answer to a divergent and competing set of political interests, districts produce guidance that is not directly responsive to the needs of students and parents. Districts grow into hierarchical, rule-bound bureaucracies that ultimately stifle the discretion that school professionals most need to respond with effective innovations. This perspective contends that systemic improvement requires dismantling these taken-for-granted institutions and placing control more directly in the hands of parents by giving them the power to select among an array of school options. At the same time, school-level

educators would acquire independence from the central bureaucracy so they could be more receptive to parental demands and student needs. In this system, choice, school autonomy, and competitive pressures are thought to shift power from central government bodies to parents and to stimulate entrepreneurial dynamism and diversification. As famously articulated by John Chubb and Terry Moe (1990), *“Democratic control tends to promote bureaucracy, markets tend to promote autonomy”* (p. 61), and *“autonomy from bureaucracy is capable of making the difference between effective and ineffective institutions”* (p. 181).

This analysis has held sway over many subsequent generations of school reformers and theorists (see, e.g. Hoxby, 2003; Lake & Hill, 2009), and has given rise to a growing sector of CMOs and other nongovernmental school operators. It has inspired many districts to adopt a version of portfolio management, whereby they invite CMOs or independent organizations to operate schools

autonomously as long as they meet specific accountability requirements (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010).

ASD leaders have largely embraced portfolio management ideas for their turnaround district, albeit with a commitment to neighborhood school enrollment systems and without the full complement of open choice. Echoing the assertions set out by Chubb and Moe twenty-five years earlier, Malika Anderson, once deputy superintendent and, as of January 2016, the superintendent of the ASD, articulated a clear rationale for minimal central bureaucracy and operator autonomy:

*One of the primary benefits of our portfolio structure with our autonomous schools and operators is our promise that we will...rapidly develop innovative, student-centered responses. This is going to enable the schools to perform much better and much faster than they would within a bureaucracy where all of the decisions are centrally made and are playing to the middle.*

To accomplish this vision, the ASD leaders have offered operators broad discretion over hiring, curriculum, instruction, and budgeting. They have assiduously avoided mandating particular interventions or requiring actions outside of the legal minimums demanded by federal or state regulation. They have maximized the flow of state per pupil funding to operators by maintaining a lean central office and initially paying for these staff positions with federal and philanthropic dollars rather than state aid. And rather than providing direct guidance to school leaders, they have restricted their own central office role to brokering resources that support operators or leveraging collaboration among operators. For instance, they have worked with

foundations and others to entice outside organizations into functions that districts typically do themselves, such as recruiting, training, and establishing a new “talent pipeline” of leaders and teachers. They have created a standing Operator Advisory Council to enable operators to collaborate on common problems and learn from each other, rather than impose central, top-down solutions. In this system, organizational experience, learning, and adaptation are the province of providers, both individually and as a collective. To again quote Malika Anderson:

*Operators came into this work with the ASD with the expectation that they would be given the freedom to make decisions, to be responsible for those decisions, and to learn from those decisions. [They would] act on their learning in a swift manner without the hindrance of a central, bureaucratic entity quarterbacking all of that. We’re making decisions, but...the magic happens when it’s driven by the folks that are closest to kids. And so separate from the Operator Advisory Council, we have intentionally decided to empower operators to own their own learning and shared practices.*

In exchange for this wide scope of autonomy, the ASD has also set very ambitious accountability targets—to move priority schools from the bottom 5% of performance in the state to the top 25% in five years. Operators that do not meet growth targets may not be permitted to expand to new schools and may be closed. The very high bar for performance and stringent sanctions are meant to create a sense of urgency, and notably exceed the targets typically set by states or charter authorizers.



ASD leaders also sought to provide operators with a political safe haven free of excessive strife and turmoil. Although ASD operators establish their own boards, the ASD does not have a democratically elected or permanent representative body, a move meant to decouple operators from the interest group politics and pressures that market theorists view as hindrances to effective and responsive school governance. Instead,

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ASD leaders created temporary community councils to advise them in matching operators to particular schools. This effort to shield operators from interest group politics has proved to be exceedingly difficult (Glazer & Egan, 2016).

Certainly none of these core managerial principles were enacted with the purity that ASD leaders once envisioned; competing pressures, weak and uneven achievement results, and the impulse to nurture fledgling operators or address crippling problems led the ASD, in the words of its leaders, towards “mission

creep.” But ASD leaders’ commitment to the core ideals of autonomy, coupled with fiscal constraints, tempered their instinct to intervene on educational matters over which operators had been assured independence.

The ASD’s overall dedication to providers’ autonomy and minimal bureaucratic intervention was reaffirmed in 2015 by scaling back activities intended to offer support (see Groth & Malone, 2016) and by creating a new strategic plan that cut the central staff and suspended much of their direct assistance to operators. The strategic plan reinforces the portfolio management view of the proper role of central bureaucracies, as an ASD staff member explained:

*We want to ensure that to the extent possible money flows to schools, and make sure that they have as much autonomy as possible. So, [we limit] some of those things that we do as a central office...that aren’t critical, but are encroaching on their autonomy, because that’s our strategy. We believe you get great people in the door and you give them autonomy and hold them accountable.*

Yet despite the ardent commitment of ASD leaders to create the conditions that would enable CMOs and independent operators to take root and flourish in the turnaround space, the inherited rules of the game, the institutional environment in which they were located, and the stresses of an impoverished community presented even the most experienced providers with steep challenges.

### III. KEY CHALLENGES IN THE ASD TURNAROUND ENVIRONMENT

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Urban and high-poverty communities have long posed extraordinary and often debilitating challenges to district officials, school leaders, and teachers. High rates of student mobility, extreme poverty, and a wide array of academic and psychological needs are challenges not uncommon in these schools. These circumstances frequently overwhelm the professional and organizational capacity of urban school systems, and trigger turnaround interventions. Many independent charters and CMOs have located in these same communities, and some have proved successful in delivering high-quality educational services to disadvantaged students (CREDO 2013, CREDO 2009; Tuttle et al., 2015).

Yet it is also true that in more typical settings, charters have access to mechanisms that can shelter them from elements of public school environments that can undermine teaching and learning. While charters have a legal obligation to admit all classifications of students, they are usually authorized to recruit students without the constraint of attendance areas, giving them access to a broad pool of families from various neighborhoods who are actively seeking out educational opportunities for their children. Along with the ability to impose early registration requirements, limit specific types of services, and demand parent involvement, this flexibility to recruit students from different locales allows charters to engage with a more stable and

academically motivated population, and to potentially reduce the numbers of students whose language or disabilities make them harder to educate (Rotberg, 2014; Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002).

These choice and student enrollment controls are largely unavailable to ASD operators. Unlike New Orleans' RSD, the legislation that gave rise to the

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ASD did not seek to create a charter sector operating within a citywide marketplace of schooling choices open to any family. Rather, it set out to establish a new system for the governance

and operation of existing neighborhood schools identified as priority under state accountability metrics and carved out from the control of their traditional local school districts. Legislators and funders hoped that under this new management regime, a deeply committed group of providers could steer a path toward remarkable results with the same rules as neighborhood schools and in the same communities where poor outcomes had long been the norm. But as we discuss in this section, this environment neutralized many of the organizational, social, and political resources that charters were designed to leverage. The ASD experience demonstrates the difficulty that charters confront absent the ability to create buy-in through meaningful choice, stabilize the treatment population, or focus on a more circumscribed set of activities that stand

in contrast to the “something for everyone” approach that characterizes many U.S. schools.

### Neighborhood Enrollment Zones and Constraints on Choice

*Exposure to instruction.* Under Tennessee statute, ASD schools may only enroll students from their respective neighborhood attendance areas.<sup>3</sup> Charter operators in general, and many of our operators specifically, express concern that zoned enrollment would constrain their ability to recruit and to fill available seats and prepare budgets accordingly (Therriault, 2015). This concern was magnified in Memphis neighborhoods where populations were already thin or declining. To be sure, these limitations did impact at least the early enrollment levels in some ASD schools, a problem that prompted ASD leaders to secure state legislation allowing operators to recruit a portion of students from other schools on the priority list.

But, at least as importantly, the unrestricted ability of students to enroll at any time under a neighborhood system significantly weakened operators’ ability to stabilize a core population and ensure that students received a full dosage of their instructional treatments. In many settings, charter school administrators can set their enrollment prior to the beginning of the school year, and can opt to require late applicants to wait until the following year. Many charter organizations also refrain from enrolling students in upper grades (“backfilling”) even when they experience attrition and have open seats (Hill & Maas, 2015; Democracy Builders, 2015). It is not difficult to understand the logic

behind these strategies. Studies show that extended student exposure to sound and well-implemented school designs is key to realizing achievement gains that accumulate over years (Rowan, Miller, & Camburn, 2009). Furthermore, the frequent entry of new students introduces a level of chaos into the learning environment, with negative consequences for incumbent students and challenges for teaching (Hill & Maas, 2015).

The ASD’s zoned enrollment system prohibited these practices. One CMO leader explained:

*I think the biggest difference [in the ASD] is that we can’t turn students away. So when I was a principal...I could say in January, we’re not going to take new students. If they came in to register they would go on the wait list for next year. ...We can’t do that in neighborhood turnaround schools, even if we are full.*

As a consequence, students’ exposure to instruction was diminished by delayed enrollment, weak attendance, and high student mobility. Operators reported that many students did not enroll until several weeks after school had begun. Moreover, more than one-third of students (36-37%) in ASD schools moved in or out of their schools during the school year (Henry et. al, 2014).<sup>4</sup> This figure represents an improvement over student mobility prior to ASD intervention and is comparable to the churn in iZone priority schools, a set of low-performing schools that received additional resources and flexibility but continued under the governance of their traditional public school districts

<sup>3</sup> The situation is different for charters in other Tennessee districts. State statute allows charter schools to open their doors to students from any geographic area, without caps, if their district authorizer approves (TCA 49-13-113, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> In 2011-12, the year before schools came into the ASD, this cohort of schools experienced 46% mobility. That rate dropped to 37% by the 2013-14 school year and has hovered between 36-37% for subsequent cohorts (Henry et al., 2014)

(Henry et al., 2014).

However, having one-third of the students change during the year is unusually high for the charter sector. In Tennessee charters as a whole, for example, the student mobility rate for 2013-14 averaged only 11%

for K-8 schools and 9% for high schools (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015).

This extreme mobility presented formidable challenges to the CMOs who had built their designs to address learning gaps early in a student's career and concentrate on nurturing those gains steadily over time. A leader from one ASD operator said:

*One of our big takeaways from last year was the effect that mobility of students has on our work. Most traditional charter schools try to attract students at lower grades, expecting students will quickly learn the culture and then stay for the next 3-6 years, depending on whether or not the school is an elementary or middle school. So, an investment early in the child's academic life benefits both the child and the school for several years to come.*

*Well, the truth is the mobility in Memphis for low-income kids, depending on the neighborhood, is going to range from 20 to 40%. So, what we learned last year is—it was our third year, which we would have said going in was going to be the dream year because students would have adjusted to our culture and be getting close to grade level academically. Instead, it was very similar to our first*

*Some CMO leaders expressed dismay that accountability calculations of their school's performance extended to the test results of students who arrived at any time throughout the school year and typically without warning.*

*year because of all the new students who arrived on our campus. For example, in fifth grade, 25% of the kids had never been in our school before. Another 25% of the kids had only been in our school one year, right. And so that made a huge difference in how we have to do instruction.*

Further, some CMO leaders expressed dismay that accountability calculations of their school's performance extended to the test results of students who arrived at any time throughout the school year and typically without warning—a problem not unfamiliar to traditional public school administrators but one that perhaps is exacerbated by the intense, high-stakes environment of the ASD.

*Kids move in and out all the time. In a traditional charter, if you're not enrolled by September 1, you can't come; if kids leave we don't replace them. Here we have kids that come in in February. No telling what they've had all year long. They don't know your culture; they don't know your school. They bring in their past practice, and now they're your student and you're responsible for making sure they grow a grade level.*

**Student and family buy-in.** The neighborhood system, compounded by poverty and other systemic barriers to choice, also altered the dynamics of family and student buy-in that choice and charter advocates believe to be an essential incentive for change. In an open choice environment, charters engage with students whose families have voluntarily elected to place them in the

school and have explicitly committed to the educational approach and values that the school represents.

Parents and students who actively choose are more likely to understand a school's philosophy, participate in

*We're the neighborhood school— if you live in our neighborhood, whether you agree with our method of instruction, you agree with our longer school day, we're the school that you need to send your child to.*

school-related activities, and adhere to its expectations (Bifulco & Ladd, 2005).

In addition, studies of parental choice have shown that active choosers are typically more involved in their child's education (Martinez et al., 1994; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999), more likely to emphasize educational priorities associated with academic outcomes (Kleitz et al., 2000), and more willing to travel to get their child to a better school (Goldring & Hausman, 1999). That some charters maintain long waiting lists of eager parents or use a lottery admissions system further underscores the difference from the involuntary and highly variable client base with which most public schools contend.

The advantages of a student body whose motivation and commitment are enhanced by parent choice are far less available to ASD operators. Although it was possible for families from these priority schools to send their children elsewhere, traditional zoning rules make each ASD school the de facto option, and unlike in the New Orleans Recovery School District, families do not

submit a list of the schools they prefer on a common application form. Explained one CMO leader:

*In your traditional charter, parents engage with you and go through a process and maybe end up having to go through the lottery. But they are taking an initiative to buy into what you're doing and if it doesn't go well, then a traditional charter can say, "You're not doing what you promised to do, so you're no longer a student." As an ASD school, you don't have that. We're the neighborhood school— if you live in our neighborhood, whether you agree with our method of instruction, you agree with our longer school day, we're the school that you need to send your child to.*

Moreover, operators perceived that in the high-poverty neighborhoods of Memphis, many families simply stayed in their schools not because they elected to do so, but because they did not have the resources to leave.<sup>5</sup> Some providers worried that the families represented the most academically disengaged and the least likely to participate in an active school selection process. As one CMO leader remarked, "*Chances are, 85% to 90% of the people stay because they're there in the neighborhood anyway, because if they wanted to make other choices, they would have already.*"

Absent a student population whose families sought out schools that met their values and priorities, several providers struggled to engender parent buy-in and engagement.

*Now you can opt out, but you didn't opt in, right? So that makes it a lot harder because the parent's engagement level is lower, their initiative is lower,*

<sup>5</sup> In 2014-15, nearly all students in ASD schools were classified as economically disadvantaged (96.6%), a much higher percentage than in SCS as a whole (79.8%).

*we're teaching in a way that's very different from what was taught in this building prior to our arrival, so it's a big change for parents. So that makes it really, really hard. So you have to win the parents, you have to convince them.*

This circumstance, coupled with a high rate of student mobility, challenged several operators' ability to firmly establish the kind of school culture and behavioral routines that they felt were essential. Many strongly believe that orienting students to their learning expectations and creating an orderly and safe environment are essential prerequisites for effective instruction and learning. A member of the Aspire leadership team emphasized this point: *"One of our big focuses outside of academics was culture, and I think you need to hammer that out before anything else"*. Likewise, KIPP Memphis leaders said their success results in large part from their ability to create a specific culture and climate that reinforce a set of behavioral expectations to which students must adhere. KIPP Memphis central office leaders conducted multiple school culture audits throughout the year, and spent substantial time inculcating behavioral routines for students. Grad Academy Memphis created a 10-day curriculum at the beginning of the year to inaugurate students in the academic routines and norms of a project-based learning school. A leader from the Frayser Community Schools also described their emphasis on creating a new culture in which consistent behaviors were expected and students felt safe to reach out to adults for help.

While a focus on school climate is common within the larger charter movement, the ASD operators lacked

their usual leverage to implement this idea. The context of zoned neighborhood enrollment with high mobility and no controls over the timing of student entry made it more difficult to establish a student body that comported with operators' norms and behavioral expectations.

*Pressure to minimize suspensions and expulsions.* Operators' capacity to determine their student body was further restricted by the ASD's effort to minimize student expulsions and suspensions. During the 2013-14 school year, 21% of ASD students were suspended and 2% were expelled and remanded to alternative school settings in the SCS or the ASD. Fourteen of these expelled students were pre-K through 3rd grade. A commitment to equity and concerns about excessive use of exclusionary practices in early grades led the ASD and some operators to try to

*Absent a student population whose families sought out schools that met their values and priorities, several providers struggled to engender parent buy-in and engagement.*

restrain such actions. In addition to issuing clear guidelines, they encouraged positive strategies for socializing students into operators' cultural systems and behavioral expectations. For example, the ASD provided professional development on a program called Positive Behavior Intervention Supports that seeks to induce good behavior while reducing suspension and expulsion rates. Several operators reported changes in their approach to student discipline. For example, the Achievement Schools network, the largest network

in the ASD, adopted restorative justice practices, and other operators developed similar strategies (see Section IV below).

The effort to reduce suspensions and expulsions in the ASD is admirable and potentially beneficial for students. Many of the operators we spoke with did not condone suspension or expulsion as a means for building a productive school culture, and some strongly opposed these actions. Yet compared with a traditional charter environment, the anti-suspension and expulsion stance of the ASD further diminishes operators' ability to control their organizational environment, establish a student body that embraces their philosophy, and engender a shared set of behavioral and cultural norms. The ASD has set remarkably high expectations for its operators, yet shrinks the array of tools at their disposal for accomplishing these goals.

### Special Education

For traditional and charter public schools alike, marshaling the economic and organizational resources to meet the needs of students with disabilities is often a vexing problem. But the concentrated and extreme levels of special needs students in Memphis schools, the funding model, the difficulty of leveraging economies of scale in the ASD context, and the perceived lack of strong external service providers, have combined to make delivery of special education services among the most daunting challenges confronting these operators.

*Large Special Education Population.* In the 2013-14 school year, 15.2% of students across the ASD

schools were identified for special education services. While these proportions were on par with other priority schools in Memphis,<sup>6</sup> they were much higher than the norm in charter or in traditional public schools.<sup>7</sup> Overall, ASD operators in Memphis served about 5% more students with disabilities than other charters in the state of Tennessee in 2014 (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015). Furthermore, these percentages have risen steadily over time, are more concentrated in some schools, and can mask the depth of students' needs. For example, 15% of ASD students requiring services in 2014-15 were classified as having "severe" disabilities—that is, needing 32.5 hours of special education and related services per week under their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). A liaison from a national charter support organization observed that ASD charters were addressing "*more students with high needs than pretty much any charter community I've seen around the country*".

Charter operators coming into the ASD were well aware that they would have to meet higher demands for special education services than they might have been accustomed to in other settings, and the ASD sought to vet operators for their experience and plans in this area. But even those with a long history in Memphis did not fully appreciate the implications of providing support in a neighborhood versus an open choice school. A leader from a CMO with schools in SCS and the ASD commented:

*Probably the biggest difference between our open enrollment school and an ASD school...is that we just have a higher number of students with high needs,*

<sup>6</sup> In iZone schools, 15.7% of enrolled students were special needs, while 17.5% of students in other Memphis priority schools were so designated (Henry et al. 2014).

<sup>7</sup> One national study found that special needs students comprised only 8% of public charter school enrollments in 2009-10, compared to 11% in traditional schools (Government Accountability Office, 2012). In most schools settings, 2% to 7% of enrolled students qualify for the highest level of intensive special education supports (Ervin, 2008).

*whether they are identified as special education students or not special education students...And a zoned school costs us more for special education because we have to be able to meet the needs of all the students.*

*Financial Model.* Even in typical charter settings with smaller proportions of classified students, the path towards a financially viable model of service for special education has been difficult for charter schools to manage (Gross & Lake, 2014). But under the zoned enrollment system, ASD operators were financially responsible for the special education of all students in their attendance areas, even if students received all of their services in another setting. Furthermore, the range and high level of needs among students with disabilities presented operators with significant resource challenges. One CMO estimated that 20% of per pupil funding from the state went into special education because they served so many students with severe disabilities.

The problem may be particularly acute in Tennessee, where the state provides a flat per-pupil amount of \$8,100 to ASD schools (2014-15), regardless of the number or type of students served. Estimates indicated that federal funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) also fell far short of operators' costs, did not account well for growth, and were difficult to fully recoup. For example, one operator received

\$66,000 for special education but reported spending over \$1 million. While this charter operated its special education program at a deficit in another state, the discrepancy between costs and revenue was much greater in Tennessee.

Operators' ability to create a solid financial plan to serve these students is further exacerbated by the high level of student mobility, since students with disabilities can arrive at any time of the year. Moreover, budget estimates vacillate from one school year to the next,

*The concentrated and extreme levels of special needs students in Memphis schools, the funding model, the difficulty of leveraging economies of scale in the ASD, and the perceived lack of strong external service providers, make delivery of special education services among the most daunting challenges confronting these operators.*

since the enrollment of just a few students with severe needs can cause sharp increases in expenditures.

In addition to the fiscal challenge, meeting the needs of special education students required investment in

other types of organizational resources. Substantial administrative staffing and expertise were needed to develop IEPs and manage relationships with parents, SCS, and other service providers, all while maintaining compliance with state and federal regulations. Beyond that, many ASD charters have struggled to marshal the knowledge, programmatic resources, and, as one involved observer put it, *"the muscle around strong, in-house special education programs."*

Providing these external and internal services forced ASD providers to make tradeoffs that diverted resources away from their core academic and instructional operations. One leader anticipated that these costs would require them to eliminate the extra



academic time they provided in summer programs and Saturday school. The difficulty of recruiting and retaining special educators also led to excessive workloads for those who remained.

*Weak Leverage for Economies of Scale.* Although public schools in traditional districts face similar challenges, they benefit from their parent districts' ability to exploit economies of scale by pooling resources in a single school or across a few schools in ways that reduce per pupil costs (Miron & Urschel, 2010). SCS, for example, operated "cluster programs" to provide the most intensive and highly specialized services for special needs students across the district. While size helps, creating such economies of scale is also a matter of system-level organization. Traditional districts have a centralized organizational structure that gives them the authority to coordinate system-wide. In the ASD, where autonomy and pushing down per pupil funding to operators have been guiding principles, any coordinated action requires that each operator determine whether and how to collaborate. Such agreements are complicated by charters' varying capabilities and needs as well as their adherence to different views of effective practice.

Faced with limited capacity and large numbers of students with severe needs, many ASD operators sent special education students to programs run by SCS, although that number has declined over time as operators develop more internal capabilities (see Section IV below). External placements generated an array of "transaction costs" that were the source of much concern. For example, several operators chafed at the limited control they had over the quality or costs of these external services. The director of

one CMO opined that, "*these alternative placements are not even coming close to meeting the needs of kids...I think we're doing what we can to monitor our kids, but these placements that they're going to are not high quality*". This was not the case in every instance, of course, and the same operator did identify some external providers that they viewed as more competent. But the perceived dearth of quality service providers in Memphis made this difficult. Without options, a few operators suspected that they were overcharged, or even billed for services to neighborhood students they had never met.

*I think everyone suspects that we're getting gouged by SCS, and we probably are, whether it's maliciously or naively. And so the market hasn't played out, and so we don't have real information on when that three-year-old shows up hearing impaired that costs X. There isn't a list of costs, and so we're all flying blind. We're all overpaying to the only provider in town.*

Further straining the relationship between ASD operators and SCS were administrative delays in the transfer of essential documentation for students entering their schools. Several suggested that the district was not forthcoming with students' IEPs, which threatened their ability to quickly identify needs and secure appropriate supports:

*There was supposed to be a process in place to transfer all the files to us. And somehow that didn't necessarily take place. So I played find the files. You know, they gave me a key and said the files are in a black filing cabinet. And so I still have the key—I still don't have the files. So we've been*

*playing find the files, and then we just stopped playing and then we started trying to identify the kids as much as we possibly could.*

As these and many similar remarks show, providers have had to marshal considerable resources and creativity to meet the needs of students with a variety of disabilities. At the same time, the financial and organizational strain this has placed on them exposes the structural limitations of a district organized around the principles of autonomy and decentralized decision-making. Moreover, as a lean organization that eschews direct involvement, the ASD has neither the capacity nor the inclination to actively broker collaborative relationships, compromises, or cost-sharing arrangements among operators. Thus, while the ASD recognized that cost-effective, quality special education services require at least some degree of coordinated action and aggregation of resources, it has heavily relied on individual operators to initiate the process and develop the mechanisms and norms that can support such an enterprise.

### A District among Districts

A third critical element that dramatically altered the dynamics of charter schooling is the fact that the ASD is a school district inserted into the territories of traditional public school districts that retain residual controls over key decisions. As such, the ASD and its operators are highly vulnerable to those districts' priorities and the dynamics of local politics. Moreover, fierce local resistance to the ASD in Memphis has contributed to an environment where the legitimacy of ASD operators has been highly contested and community support must be actively constructed.

This combination of interdependence with the local district and local pushback against the ASD has further weakened operators' control over their environment, increased uncertainty, and placed additional demands on their organizational capacities.

One example regards Shelby County Schools' legal authority to render decisions that influence operators' planning and organizational designs. SCS retains responsibility for drawing the neighborhood attendance boundaries that determine school enrollment and feeder patterns, which SCS could alter even during an

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academic year. Operators reported that these changes affected their budgeting and ability to plan based on student enrollment. For example, the SCS school board passed a resolution expanding grade levels served by its own schools to enable parents to bypass a priority school assigned to the ASD and matched to the CMO Scholar Academies (Pignolet, 2016).

Shelby County Schools' informal powers were also considerable, and were amply demonstrated in highly charged negotiations over which schools should be absorbed into the ASD and which should remain with them. Since the ASD alone could not serve all the priority schools identified for intervention, the state

allowed several districts to create iZones, which operate schools under traditional district jurisdiction but with additional resources and more regulatory flexibility.

For the leaders of the ASD and the SCS iZone, school selection became high-stakes negotiations in which the condition of facilities, feeder patterns, and potential student enrollment levels were crucial considerations. Although the ASD leaders technically could have selected any priority school they wanted, they recognized these critical underlying issues and the importance of moving forward in a way that made sense to all parties involved. But they also felt their right to use their preemptive powers were restricted by their schools' relatively lackluster performance compared to the iZone (Glazer & Egan, 2016). Some CMO leaders believed that SCS was claiming the most economically viable schools, narrowing providers' path to economic viability. Said one:

*There's a fight for kids with a district that's just trying to stay afloat, and then you've got this ASD coming in that's only making that harder. So I know that there's been a lot of effort and there's been a lot of rhetoric around the relationship. But when I look at the actual benefits of those relationships, I feel like Shelby County has played the better strategy throughout this whole past three years...So, not only would we get access to smaller schools, but also they would be ones that are super underenrolled.*

Another district-level decision about the co-location of ASD charters in the same buildings as SCS schools further strained operators' resources, compromised their turnaround strategies, and hindered the ASD's ability to retain or recruit providers that typically phase-

in their school designs one grade level per year. This is a popular approach, and in the first four cohorts, over one-third of the schools in the ASD were authorized to use this strategy (Kim, Field, & Hargrave, 2015). Phase-in allows operators to incrementally build up a corps of students with a common foundation for learning and behavioral norms. Moreover, it offers operators the opportunity to gradually expand their own capacity and to refine their designs in new situations. The achievement results of the 2013-14 school year suggested to ASD leaders that *"phase-ins are...finding much more immediate success than schools that are trying to go in and do all the grades at once,"* as one official noted.

But while the phase-in strategy made good sense for some ASD operators, it created a contentious and volatile situation in the community and thus for SCS. In schools with co-location, students in upper grades (i.e., those not yet phased-in) were left with the choice of remaining in a building served by demoralized district teachers, or moving to other, often similarly weak, public schools outside the neighborhood. Dorsey Hopson, the SCS superintendent, depicted co-location as a losing proposition for the district:

*[It's] an awkward, demoralizing, and expensive situation for the staff left at the traditional public schools, who have to run the rest of the building for several years, waiting for the charter school to take the reins. They know their jobs will eventually be eliminated, and the district has to continue paying for secretaries, assistant principals, and utility bills despite a rapidly dwindling enrollment. (Hopson, quoted in Burnette, 2014)*

In 2014, this problem came to a head during the matching deliberations for Yes Prep, a Texas-based CMO that had been authorized by the ASD to use a phase-in approach in two schools. Due to these challenges, the SCS school board passed a policy suspending co-locations, deciding instead to send all students in remaining grades to other district schools. In one of the proposed Yes Prep sites, more than 500 students faced the prospect of being bussed.

*Charters are accustomed to serving a willing and eager parent population that have actively chosen them. In the ASD, passive parent selection, let alone active and vocal opposition, is far outside their usual experience.*

This prospect stirred vocal community opposition, and ultimately the advisory group created by the ASD to solicit input to match operators to priority schools recommended against the selection of Yes Prep. These circumstances contributed to Yes Prep's decision to withdraw from Memphis altogether, despite significant planning and investments and an agreement to open a different site (Dries, 2015).

Charters are accustomed to serving a willing and eager parent population that have actively chosen them. In the ASD, passive parent selection, let alone active and vocal opposition, is far outside their usual experience. One operator contrasted the backlash in Memphis with the support and tranquility they were accustomed to in their home state:

*This has been humbling for me. We've been quite shielded from a lot of the politics and press....I've learned so much about just how complex education can be in particular landscapes. We're very fortunate that our home state kind of lets us have the number of kids we want. We buy our own buildings. We kind of own the whole process.*

The delicate coexistence with SCS further eroded operators' control over an environment in which they clearly do not "own the whole process" but rather must make painful accommodations to political resistance, and a local district whose ties to the community afford it considerable legitimacy.

Shelby County Schools' decision to bar phase-ins had repercussions for several other operators as well. While some CMOs like Green Dot were accustomed to whole school transformations and had experience with its risks and challenges, others had to decide whether to reframe their work or consider withdrawal. Phase-in models are based on a particular projection of student enrollment, with implications for design, central support teams, and school staffing, among other things. KIPP, which already had several schools in Memphis, decided to withdraw from one ASD site rather than divert from its customary phase-in strategy (McCall, 2014). By contrast, Cornerstone Prep switched to a whole school transformation model in its second school, believing that despite the difficulties of doing so, using this model was necessary "because of the political climate, and because we want to make sure parents feel like we're looking out for their best interests."

But community resistance was motivated by more than public concerns about co-location. The conversion of schools into the ASD engendered fierce outcries and vocal mistrust about ASD intentions and the process to make that change. Across the country, school turnaround initiatives that remove schools from local control or lead to the dismissal of educators has consistently bred anger and resentment. In Memphis, deep historical divides have fueled suspicion about the accuracy of accountability calculations, the operators' intents in coming to their schools, and the overall legitimacy of the ASD. With some exceptions, providers were portrayed as outsiders that lacked the cultural sensitivity and legitimacy to run neighborhood schools (Glazer & Egan, 2016).

ASD officials sought to defuse the situation, in part by establishing strong working relationships with the district in order to increase coordination and stimulate improvement of schools both in and out of the ASD. They made numerous overtures to engage SCS in building a citywide common application and enrollment system to improve parents' ability to choose among schools. They also sought to create a common accountability framework to ease the path for charter schools located in both districts.

These overtures underestimated the disruptive nature of the ASD, the resistance it would engender, and the

pressures on SCS leaders to avoid close association with the ASD. SCS district officials acknowledge that the presence of the ASD raised community awareness and passion in regard to local schools, and in so doing provided them with political capital and public support to inaugurate needed reforms (e.g., establishing the iZone or closing underutilized buildings). However, that capital was generated largely because the ASD was viewed as a threat to neighborhood schools, jobs, and local control. Many in Memphis believe that state school turnaround is in fact a takeover and is just another instance of white racism and paternalism

(Glazer & Egan, 2016), and local anger toward the ASD has strained the viability of collaboration between the two agencies. A SCS official explained that hostility toward the

*The tense atmosphere and relations with SCS constitutes a key part of the charter environment in the ASD, adding substantial operational uncertainties.*

ASD created political pressure on the district to “*spend unnecessary time distancing itself from the ASD*” rather than “*come together as a partner, and think of ways to improve educational opportunities for everybody.*” The tense atmosphere and relations with SCS constitutes a key part of the charter environment in the ASD, adding substantial operational uncertainties.

As we show next, many operators have embraced these central challenges of the ASD environment and their efforts may prove to be successful. Yet it cannot be discounted that addressing the diverse set of exigencies stretches their resources and ability to focus. Their story is still unfolding.

## IV. STRETCHING OUT: ADAPTATIONS IN THE ASD TURNAROUND CONTEXT

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The turnaround environment of the ASD imposed unusual conditions for charter operators. Without the ability to stabilize their student population and a meaningful system of elective choice, operators had weaker leverage over key aspects of their work, such as extended student exposure to their program, culture, and family buy-in. This was compounded by a political atmosphere tense from the narrative of state interference in local control and, for national operators, their status as outsider organizations. The location of the ASD inside the territory of other districts also made operators vulnerable to many district decisions.

Nevertheless, operators have responded to resulting challenges with more sophisticated school-level designs that included instructional adaptations and initiatives, and expansions to their organizational capabilities. In this section, we discuss several of these shifts. Here we take a broad look at the instructional and organizational modifications operators designed to handle the constant churn in the student population, the depth and diversity of student learning needs, including students with disabilities, and the disciplinary efforts that emerged without the commitments and practices that a choice-based charter enrollment plan usually affords. Relatedly, we look at the range of new initiatives operators developed to engage parents and reach out to the wider community—initiatives intended to open communication, garner trust, and earn greater support and acceptance for their role in Memphis.

### Stretching the Instructional Design

At the instructional level, the transience of the student population meant constant uncertainty and a body of students with a disparate array of learning needs. This upheaval and instability posed two core dilemmas for the operators who were unfamiliar with this context. One was an urgent need to expand and refine their instructional infrastructure—the curriculum, materials, instructional strategies, and more—in ways that would effectively address students with more varied academic needs. A second was the complexity of determining whether these expanded efforts were effective, or whether they should hold fast to design elements that had been successful in other settings. Were poor results a lack of exposure to treatment, or bad treatment designs? Furthermore, would making changes and reallocating resources to different endeavors damage the original services they had been authorized to provide? As Malika Anderson summarized, the quandary for operators is *“how to customize a program that will care for individual students who have wildly divergent needs, when the basis of authorization...was on a very well-researched and executed program that was focused on a different set of students”*.

To handle the problem that churn posed to their analysis, Cornerstone Prep analyzed student results in cohorts according to their years of exposure to treatment, to help distinguish between the potency of their model and the extent of students' exposure to it.

*We learned that we have to track our achievement*

*in groups of kids or cohorts. The kids who have been with us for three years should be proficient. If students in this cohort are not proficient, we should be looking at our model. The kids who have been in our building for two years should be behind the three-year students but growing in a similar fashion. And then the kids who have just shown up on our campus, historically speaking, are going to be three grade levels behind. And so we have to change our understanding of how to measure our success, which means there is not really a steady trend of overall school growth but rather growth of cohorts. It also means there is no such thing as getting to the place where the culture is set and the gaps are closed. Every year is a first year.*

Operators experimented with a complement of initiatives to target identified knowledge and skill gaps with more individualized learning opportunities and tailored, small group instruction. The process of creating and implementing these new strategies required sustained effort, expertise, and adaptations to practice, as solving one problem often led to complexity or challenges in other aspects of the work. For example, to more precisely pinpoint students' particular learning needs, one CMO, Gestalt, developed a refined learning scale with eight different ability levels. But they found that classroom teachers were overwhelmed with the task of identifying and providing instruction targeted to each level, an implementation problem that led Gestalt leaders to design new instructional routines to reduce the complexity of this work. They did so by introducing computer-assisted learning into the classroom in order to free up teachers to target other groups. They also reallocated staff and instructional time to provide small group instruction during a 75-minute

intervention block. As one Gestalt operator explained:

*What happens when you don't teach at grade level is that the deficit becomes even deeper. And it is a struggle for teachers to figure out how to teach eight different lesson plans. That is the reason why we went to a small group blended learning type of instruction. ...You have the work on the child's level for the personalized computer part plus a really in-depth intervention block where the group is even smaller. ...Every teacher in the building is an interventionist...so the groups that are typically in the class are 8 to 10 kids.*

Other operators also sought new curricula and programs tailored to low-performing students, including similar blended learning technologies. Like Gestalt, Cornerstone Prep complemented computer-assisted instruction with a new intervention block involving every employee in the building. To reduce the cognitive demand on teachers that high levels of differentiation would require, Cornerstone Prep developed a co-

*Operators experimented with a complement of initiatives to target identified knowledge and skill gaps with more individualized learning opportunities and tailored, small group instruction.*

teaching model. Adaptations of this nature demand an array of organizational resources including expertise, staff time, and money, and point to the robust capabilities that operators must develop to meet the needs of ASD students. But most operators, and the ASD leadership, concluded that more intensive and

targeted supports were essential in the ASD setting.

The challenge confronting operators, then, is how to design an approach to curriculum and instruction that addresses the variation of needs among students without overwhelming their organizational and professional resources. From his birds-eye view, Chris Barbic, the former ASD superintendent, began to appreciate the complexity of this work:

*You're not going to find enough teachers who can differentiate at the level that our teachers need to every single day. It's an impossible feat. Folks are figuring out ways to do that through both technology and how you structure and organize your staff—and no one has figured it out yet, but I think people are starting to.*

### Stretching School Wraparound Supports

ASD operators understood that they would have to cast far beyond intensive academic supports to address some of the fundamental challenges impeding their students' abilities to learn. While some operators began with an understanding of the importance of wraparound services and plans for them, other operators were forced to expand or adapt their services to fit the unique needs of the Memphis community and students. They built or contracted for wraparound services to address health and social service needs, student safety, parent employment, and housing stability. One operator conducted home visits to connect families to these services. Operators created after-school options, partnered with food banks, created financial literacy programs for parents, and more. A staff member from a national charter philanthropy explained that the depth and breadth of ASD community outreach efforts

were highly atypical of the foundation's experience with charters in other settings. But operators believed such investments were critical. Without them, reflected one school leader, the work they do at the school falls backward and *"it's like a revolving cycle—like you're pressing play and rewind again and again"*.

### Stretching the Designs for Serving Students with Disabilities

The large proportion of students with disabilities and extreme needs posed a third challenge with major implications for charter organizations. Regardless of operators' experience with these populations, the depth of student need in Memphis and the distinctive governance arrangements in the ASD placed unusual and often acute strains on charters' financial and staffing capabilities.

To address the challenges of the ASD context, operators began to expand their internal capacity to provide instructional services and supports for special needs students. Green Dot, Aspire, Achievement Schools, and Gestalt, for example, developed functional skills classrooms, and several operators created self-contained classrooms or pre-K programs for students with disabilities.

They also developed ways to coordinate supports across schools within their own network, or across networks with similar approaches and needs, to generate mini-economies of scale. For example, the Achievement Schools assigned students with specific disabilities to one of their five schools. Explained one leader, *"rather than having our folks spread thin trying to be able to effectively reach kids at every one of our schools, we instead have a couple of folks who are*



*very strong...at just one school".* The Achievement Schools, Green Dot, and Aspire agreed to share the costs of an enrichment teacher for gifted students rather than each having to pay one teacher for a small segment of their students.

While these efforts are promising, operators' varying levels of expertise and divergent needs complicates such efforts. For example, an early proposal to have the ASD provide a menu of services that operators would select on an as-needed basis was deemed

*The model then has to recognize that if students have not affirmatively selected in, they have to have different ways of reaching them, of motivating them, of encouraging them to go above and beyond.*

*—Malika Anderson, ASD superintendent*

financially infeasible due to operators' highly varying requests and the difficulty of achieving an economically viable plan for any particular service. In the area of special education, this has meant that operators must continue at least some contracting with external providers. One operator developed their own services for students with severe behavioral disabilities but still had to secure approximately \$1 million to support external nursing and therapy for 20 students.

The ASD is also seeking to enhance special education resources for operators and modifying allocation mechanisms to cover services for students with the most severe needs. Specifically, the ASD created a formula to distribute IDEA dollars to operators based on the number of students they serve with the highest

needs; operators will pay for services for students in lower tiers with other funds (Public Impact, 2015). In addition, a philanthropy has agreed to match IDEA funds, as well as provide consultants, technical assistance, special education enrollment coordination, and advocacy for operators who elect to participate. These additional funds will certainly help to offset the considerable costs that providers have incurred, but the strategy is highly dependent on philanthropic largesse. A more sustainable strategy is needed for leveraging economies of scale in a highly decentralized system.

### Stretching the Design for School Culture

ASD operators reported that many of their families did not actively select their school and were frequently unaware of the schools' behavioral norms and academic expectations. As we have discussed, this presented an unusual circumstance for charters that were used to having an elective population, as well as having the power to dismiss students who do not follow rules considered essential to a learning climate. ASD leaders cautioned operators that they would have to develop new ways of motivating and encouraging students and families to embrace a common set of values and behavioral norms, as Malika Anderson noted:

*The model then has to recognize that if students have not affirmatively selected in, they have to have different ways of reaching them, of motivating them, of encouraging them to go above and beyond—without the stick of being able to kick them out...So if the student doesn't fit into your program, it doesn't mean the student changes, it means the program changes. That's different.*

Operators responded to the challenge of a non-elective

population in various ways. To encourage alternatives to expelling disruptive students, the Operator Advisory Council recommended a set of behavioral assessments and disciplinary practices for the preK-3 grades. The ASD offered professional development on the Positive Behavior Intervention Supports program, and the Achievement Schools network and Grad Academy Memphis adopted restorative justice practices to empower students to resolve conflicts. Moreover, the ASD and the Operator Advisory Council also sought to restrict exclusionary practices by collectively developing clear, voluntary guidelines. These adaptations may represent a change in the right direction; what is unambiguous, however, is that the task of inculcating shared norms is more complex for ASD operators than it is for typical charter school operators.

### Stretching Parent Engagement and Community Outreach

General resentment towards the ASD and anger about the removal of specific schools from local control meant that operators began their work with a deficit of community support. At the same time, many families

*To build trust and support, operators launched more extensive outreach campaigns and developed new methods of soliciting parental buy-in and community understanding.*

who attended ASD schools had not actively chosen their school. To build trust and support, operators launched more extensive outreach campaigns and developed new methods of soliciting parental buy-in and

community understanding. This involved establishing and nourishing an array of institutional and personal relationships across key stakeholder groups in their neighborhoods and schools. All of these efforts required a considerable investment of staff time and resources.

For example, one CMO developed new formal structures within and across schools to generate regular parent input and guidance, and created more occasions for social interaction and celebration with families to establish the school as a community institution.

*There are a couple of things that we did in addition to the kind of traditional things that we do at our (non-ASD) schools to engage families. Each school has an advisory school council and parents are officers; they meet monthly... We're creating a regional parent council... to have parents who know what's going on, can give us input, and also parents who are willing to speak up and say something about the school... if they're ever concerned. We also have a lot more community events at each school.*

As this suggests, providers looked for new ways to communicate with families and solicit their buy-in. For example, after disappointing participation in traditional open houses, leaders of one network found that parents were much more enthusiastic about and more likely to attend sporting events. They strategically used these opportunities to communicate with parents about their programs and their students.

While attending such activities increases the burden on teachers, operators increasingly saw these activities as vital to their work in the ASD. Another charter official reported encouraging “teachers to step up and own

*different events at the school,”* adding that although *“it’s hard in the beginning...it is not really optional. It’s something that we have to prioritize”*. Thus, while some charter organizations may cut back on “the frill” of sports to focus their resources more intensively on academic endeavors, ASD operators sought to maintain or build nonacademic programs and assign teachers to these events. Moreover, charters did not simply rely on getting families to come to them, but instead deployed staff to go out into the community, using *“the techniques that you would to generate a great outcome at church,”* as one official noted, to develop relationships and pique greater interest in the schools.

Importantly, this work extended beyond parents to include a broader swath of the community. For example, Grad Academy Memphis dedicated a staff member to develop community partnerships with the local university, churches, businesses, and civic groups, and engaged in community walks to students’ homes to hear parents’ concerns and feedback. Several operators also believed that school turnaround required neighborhood turnaround writ large.

This belief led another CMO to purchase and clean up abandoned homes or lots near the school, and even to invest in building new housing. A different operator hired a local organization for its lawn work and other maintenance that employed neighborhood men.

In addition to the direct support provided through such outreach, many operators hoped that cultivating community relationships beyond students’ families

would create more positive perspectives on the charter work and help heal the wounds of state intervention. In the words of one CMO leader:

*We have several relationships with local churches, alumni associations, and other neighborhood partners. The urgency now is making sure those partnerships are preserved because we’re converting existing schools, and then we’re adding grades to them. This dynamic of creating new traditions quickly is important. We want all stakeholders to continue to see the school, or start to see the school, in a new light, as a positive thing.*

To be sure, such outreach efforts, and the face-to-face contact and programs that facilitated communication and engagement, were very labor and resource intensive. The investment in these initiatives stretched the attention of the charters across a wider, more diffuse array of purposes that diverted resources from

*The investment in these initiatives stretched the attention of the charters across a wider, more diffuse array of purposes that diverted resources from school and classroom-level systems.*

school and classroom-level systems. At least three CMOs in our sample reported that they struggled to maintain a balance between outreach efforts and the

imperative to build and consolidate a strong academic program. These examples represent the extent to which operators have embraced these challenges. But there is no doubt that the allocation of more staff, effort, and money to outreach and engagement taxes the capacity of organizations that already confront formidable educational challenges.

## V. FINAL REFLECTIONS

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ASD operators were not were not naïve about the challenges that a turnaround environment in Tennessee might pose. Indeed, some had experience with turnaround work, and others had deep knowledge of and experience with the neighborhoods and communities they would be serving. Before opening in the ASD, they were informed about the rules of the game, such as the restrictions on choice and the zoned neighborhood enrollment system, as well as the depth of poverty and student need. But despite these challenges, the ASD presented CMOs with a rare opportunity to prove their mettle under the auspices of a district strongly dedicated to their success and aligned to the same managerial principles. Unlike many portfolio districts where internal resistance to various dimensions of charter schooling and autonomy are not infrequent (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010; Yatsko, Nelson, & Lake, 2013), ASD leaders were fully committed to providing their operators with as much freedom as law or regulation would allow and to maximizing their resources. In these and other ways, the ASD was an ideal charter turnaround environment.

Even so, the circumstances for operators have proved daunting. The conditions of turnaround in the ASD have demanded that they make considerable adaptations to their instructional and organizational designs. As we show here, operators' inability to control the timing of new student entry meant that their schools always had a population with highly varied levels of academic experience and exposure to operators' instructional treatment. This difference necessitated a more multifaceted instructional strategy

and set of interventions to address a wider spectrum of student learning needs. Student mobility and the absence of strong choice also made it more difficult for operators to consolidate a school culture and set behavioral expectations to support learning, and to secure parental buy-in. As Chris Barbic, the former ASD superintendent, opined, few could really anticipate the implications of a turnaround environment until they lived the experience:

*The analogy is like driving a car. I mean, you can just sit in a driver's ed class, you can read about it in a book, you can talk about how to drive a car, but until you get behind the wheel of the car and actually start driving it, you don't really appreciate how hard it is to learn to drive a car. We could tell people it was hard, we could talk about how this was different than charter schools prior to this and how charter schooling was done. But until you open up the school and get the students and start understanding what the work is like, you just can't appreciate it.*

While some might argue that the conditions for charters in the ASD put them on an even playing field with their public counterparts in high-poverty neighborhoods, the reality for ASD charters was in many ways more complex. ASD operators had to contend with many of the constraints that impede traditional schools yet without the benefits that a conventional district could provide. For one thing, traditional public schools have the advantage of being just that—traditional. Regardless of their performance, these schools and their employees have the imprimatur of long local

standing, and the social and political capital that accrues with this resident identity. As outsiders tainted by the perception of state takeover, nearly all ASD charters were cast with suspicion and did not enjoy this taken-for-granted status.

Similarly, being located in an unusual institutional space made ASD operators dependent on a school district where factions could be indifferent, if not hostile, to their success. As we have shown, although the ASD had considerable statutory authority, SCS retained substantial control and informal power that left operators vulnerable to its decisions about neighborhood zoning, school phase-ins, and the pool of priority schools to which they could be matched. Charters' work and potential were also influenced by SCS' inaction, particularly by the district's decision not to develop a common application system or

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*Moreover, the structure and ideology of the ASD meant that virtually the entire burden of overcoming these challenges was delegated to providers who themselves vary in their capacity and experience.*

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common school accountability framework. The ASD case for the mutual benefits that could accrue from such collaboration was again weakened by its status as a state-run turnaround district in a community with an elected school board that was wary of the intentions of these outsiders and their impact on local schools and employment. Furthermore, the ASD's ability to maneuver was hampered by operators' slow improvement and their weak student performance relative to SCS iZone schools.

These factors, coupled with the ASD's status as a start-up portfolio district with a passionate commitment to decentralization, had direct consequences for charters grappling to meet the severe and variable social, emotional, and academic needs of their student populations.

Portfolio management models in established districts have extant infrastructure and the relative economic advantages of scale, which better positions them to provide or absorb some of the financial risks of extraordinary services. As a start-up, the ASD did not have this foundation or a sufficient number of schools to feasibly assume these risks, and by design the ASD avoided the kind of central systems that could coordinate needed resources. Moreover, the structure and ideology of the ASD meant that virtually the entire burden of overcoming these challenges was delegated to providers who themselves vary in their capacity and experience.

In special education and other domains, the ASD charters initiated numerous changes and made extensive efforts to respond to these instructional and organizational demands. They added or reallocated resources to expand their own special education classrooms, and collaborated with other operators to leverage greater efficiencies. They reorganized assessment and instruction, introduced computer-assisted learning, added wraparound services for students and families, and developed new strategies for communicating with parents and building trust in their neighborhood communities. These adaptations are reminiscent of a handful of successful comprehensive school reform initiatives that also lacked the advantages of schools of choice

but compensated with highly sophisticated designs for teaching, learning, and leadership (Cohen et al., 2014). The most successful of these comprehensive school reforms demonstrated effects that dwarf the vast majority of reform efforts (Rowan et al., 2009).

These adaptations and expansions reflect a deep commitment to carrying out the work of turnaround and finding solutions to the challenges. But they do come at a cost, and not merely financial ones.

Whereas charters usually have the leverage to

tighten their focus, these circumstances led them to expand their goals and scope of activity. Without casting any judgment about the quality, “innovativeness,” or

efficacy of these initiatives, one cannot help but notice that this diffusion of purpose is similar to their district-led counterparts—and is a feature that researchers have long cited as a source of weakness in traditional public schooling (e.g. Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). That weakness may not be the ultimate result here, as the more successful comprehensive school reforms demonstrate, but guarding against that dilution of core goals is certainly a caution worth noting.

Finally, we observe that the enthusiasm for an ASD-style turnaround district by charter advocates and policymakers in several states continues unabated. The philanthropic and nonprofit sectors remain strong supporters of the turnaround work, and have stepped in to provide additional resources and expertise around

many of the challenges discussed here. ASD and charter leaders continue their efforts to carve out the kind of political and social space they need to restore community confidence in their efforts and sustain their strategy for education reform. Some ASD operators bring a tremendous amount of institutional knowledge and experience that is reflected not just in passion, but also in thoughtful strategies to improve teaching and learning. If these models can be adapted to the environment of the ASD, students, families, and

neighborhoods all stand to gain.

But the turnaround space for charters is indisputably different from their usual circumstances, and as such calls for a

very different type of schooling operation. As Chris Barbic cautioned, playing in the “big leagues” of school turnaround is incredibly challenging and is not suitable for every charter organization:

*These adaptations and expansions reflect a deep commitment to carrying out the work of turnaround and finding solutions to the challenges. But they do come at a cost, and not merely financial ones.*

*Three years ago we would have been in sell mode as to why you need to come here. When I’m talking to people now, I’m like, this is the big leagues. If you want to play the equivalent to basketball for the Kentucky Wildcats where every single game is huge, it’s a circus, you’re under intense scrutiny, the pressure to perform is incredible. Some people love that and love the challenge of that...I think the pitch now is if you think you’re ready for the big leagues, come to Memphis.*

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## Appendix A: List of ASD Operators in Our Sample

Achievement Schools

Aspire Public Schools

Capstone Education Group (Cornerstone Prep)

Frayser Community Schools

Gestalt Community Schools

Green Dot Public Schools

KIPP: Memphis Collegiate Schools

LEAD Public Schools

Project GRAD USA