Better Options, Better Futures

Eight Years of the Newark Charter School Fund
Why An Eight-Year Report?

When the Newark Charter School Fund was launched, it was envisioned as a time-bound, targeted effort to spur the quality growth of the city’s charter sector. After two phases of funding spanning an eight-year period, NCSF was originally slated to wind down its funding and operations. After a robust assessment of local charter school and stakeholder needs, it was resoundingly confirmed that the Fund’s work must continue on, indefinitely, while deepening the local roots, ownership, and sustainability of the organization over the long term.

Acknowledgments

The success of the Newark Charter School Fund to date would not be possible without a team of dedicated partners, supporters, funders, friends, and fellow advocates who lead by their own example every day with their unwavering commitment to meeting the needs of Newark’s students. This committed network of leaders has been essential to driving the entire city toward high-quality educational options for all students, and we are honored to share in this movement with such talented and dedicated partners.

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Foreword

by Senator Cory Booker

Our children have unrealized promise and immeasurable potential.

There is urgency in the cause of their education that demands we take action no matter how difficult the challenges they or we face.

Our stern loyalty toward our children necessitates that we do not tarry with things that do not empower them to succeed.

If we are falling short of our core values of equal opportunity, justice and fairness, if we are failing to manifest for them the richest of liberty — the liberation of their minds from the shackles of ignorance or mediocrity — then we must put forth extraordinary effort and be bold enough to risk, innovate and reimagine for their well-being.

These have been the courageous convictions of the Newark Charter School Fund. With an unwavering loyalty to our children, relentless and innovative work on their behalf and a commitment to making real our collective values, the Fund has served children in Newark with extraordinary results.

I’m so proud of the years of leadership, vision and work of those involved in the Newark Charter School Fund, and I’m grateful that I was able to play a role in helping to launch it and
raise resources for its work. It is a part of my legacy as mayor of which I am immensely proud. Looking back, it is clear to me that launching the Fund in 2008 was truly a transformative moment for the city.

Quite simply, Newark students are significantly better off today than they were just a few short years ago.

Students in Newark across the board — whether they attend public charter schools or more traditional district schools — now have access to more high-performing educational options, and for the first time in a long time, the overall educational trend in Newark is robustly improving.

"With an unwavering loyalty to our children, relentless and innovative work on their behalf and a commitment to making real our collective values, the Fund has served children in Newark with extraordinary results."

The data is compelling and dramatic. For example, the odds of an African American student in Newark being enrolled in a good school have doubled. The percentage of black Newark students attending a school that beat the state proficiency average has tripled over the past decade. According to a University of Washington study, Newark schools lead all of our nation in terms of the share of students in “beat the odds” schools — schools with high poverty rate kids in high-performing schools — and the Brookings Institution named Newark the fourth-best school district in the country for quality public school choice and competition in 2015.

My vision for Newark has been, and continues to be, one in which high-quality, public schools are incubators not just of knowledge and genius, but also of hope for a brighter future for Newark and all of its residents.

As this report clearly demonstrates, Newark’s public charter schools are delivering on that vision, thanks in no small part to the tireless work of the Newark Charter School Fund and its partners in excellence.
Introduction

by Mashea Ashton, CEO

What is the measure of a great city? Is it a flourishing economy, impressive architecture and parks, or a thriving arts and culture scene? Those things are important, but perhaps the most important measure of a great city is the way it prepares its children for the future through education.

Over the past eight years, the Newark Charter School Fund has sought to increase the number of high-quality school options for Newark students and families, providing access to the education Newark families and students need to succeed.

And in many substantial ways, that's exactly what we've managed to do. When we first embarked on this endeavor in 2008, we set out with a goal of addressing the serious demand for high-quality school options in Newark. For decades, there had been what can only be described as an achievement crisis in Newark, and the public charter sector already in place in 2008 served a relatively small number of students.

During our first four years, the Fund placed a special emphasis on working to facilitate growth and strengthen the quality of the Newark charter school sector, goals that we have continued to meet even as our scope of operations has expanded to include increased equity and access for students, district and sector-wide collaboration, and advocacy initiatives.

Since its launch, the Fund has made an undeniable impact on the quality of education in Newark and on the number of high-quality options available to the city’s families. We’ve done this by supporting the growth of the charter sector, which has quadrupled the number of seats available, and now serves about one-third of all public school students. Newark’s charter sector is now recognized as one of the very top-achieving sectors in the nation in terms of math and reading impact for students.

Moreover, we’ve managed to make major strides in providing Newark parents with options that will give their children the excellent education they deserve and the power to choose
what’s best for their children. The Fund has done this while pushing for increased standards of transparency and accountability, as well as principles of equity, to ensure that all students are able to be served by the Newark charter sector.

This report attempts to capture both the measurable and immeasurable impacts of initiatives such as the Newark Charter School Compact and universal enrollment. These programs and others highlighted in this report illustrate the sector’s commitment to quality, access, and transparency for Newark families.

The full extent of the Fund’s impact will come to fruition when generations of students bring what they’ve learned in Newark charter schools back to the city, building an even brighter future for Brick City as it heads into its fourth century.

While we’ve made tremendous progress, there is still much work to do. I hope that this report will provide a worthwhile look at our past accomplishments, while giving us a lens to clearly view the road ahead.

By continuing to focus on providing equitable access to quality educational options and collaborating with the charter sector, the city, and our stakeholders, we will bring transformative change to Newark’s education system that will provide a model for the rest of the nation. By making sure that every child has the excellent education that they deserve and that families have the power to choose what is best for their children, the Newark Charter School Fund is helping to create a bright future for all students.

If the most important measure of a city is how it prepares its children for the future, Newark is getting on the path to greatness. With continued attention to students’ and families’ needs for more options of high-quality schools delivering excellent education to serve all of the city’s children, each generation will enjoy a stronger, more prosperous Newark.

[Signature]
In examining the Fund’s work in Newark, four themes emerged as central to sustained success: quality growth, access and equity, collaboration, and advocacy.

**Quality Growth**

The sector's most visible achievement over the past eight years may be its tremendous growth. During this time frame, the sector quadrupled in size from serving just 8 percent in 2008 to serving roughly one-third of all public school students in Newark in the 2015-2016 academic year.

- 33% of public school students in Newark in charters
- 20 Newark charter schools, 44 campuses
- 3x more black students in Newark schools that beat the state average

The first years of operation for the Newark Charter School Fund speak to the strong desire for real educational options in the Newark community and serve as a testament to the charter sector’s commitment to meeting that need. Whether it’s the growth of the charter sector or the consistent improvement in school performance and quality by nearly every measure, the Fund has experienced groundbreaking success as a pioneer in the expansion of quality educational options for students in the city of Newark.
More significant, however, is that this growth has occurred in tandem with sustained and improved quality. Despite clear challenges, Newark’s charter sector ranked second in the nation out of 41 urban districts in both reading and math achievement impact, according to Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) 2015 study.

Additionally, according to a 2015 Center on Reinventing Public Education report, more than 86 percent of Newark charter school students are enrolled in schools that are considered to be “beating the odds” in math, and 76 percent are enrolled in schools that are “beating the odds” in reading. This means that these schools are outperforming other schools in the state with similar demographics.

**Access and Equity**

Another hallmark of the Fund’s efforts in Newark has been access and equity. Most notably, the Fund has successfully spurred both through a groundbreaking joint universal enrollment initiative with Newark Public Schools. Under universal enrollment, now in its third year, parents simply fill out a single application to rank their top public charter or district school choices. Accessing the education options in Newark using a single application eases the burden for parents who will no longer need to go door to door to find out about options, timelines, and enrollment requirements. It has also confirmed the strong local demand for charters, with 42 percent of parents listing a charter school as their first choice in 2015.

This, along with the Fund’s other efforts to support more options and better services for all students, is producing strong results. The percentage of students with special needs being served by charters has significantly increased in recent years. Additionally, similar to the district, more than four in five students in the charter sector qualify for subsidized free or reduced-price lunch.

- **42%**
  - of Newark Enrolls applications for the 2015-2016 school year listed a charter school as the first choice

- **86%**
  - of Newark charter students enrolled in a school beating the odds in math; 76% in reading

- **#2**
  - Newark charter sector ranking out of 41 cities in math and reading impact
Collaboration

The past eight years have also demonstrated the power of collaboration to bring about real change on every level. From efforts to promote collaboration within the sector, such as the first-of-its-kind Newark Charter School Compact, to establishing solid working relationships between charter and traditional district public schools, the Fund has been on the front lines of breaking down the “us versus them” mentality that could derail efforts to do what’s best for students.

Advocacy

Finally, success in building a robust charter sector has demonstrated the need for passionate advocacy that supports effective reforms and prioritizes quality, transparency, and accountability. To this end, the Fund has directly supported partnerships to engage thousands of charter school parents and other members of the Newark community in efforts to promote and protect access to high-quality educational options and ensure that future generations of the city’s children can continue to benefit from the ongoing work.

What this report ultimately demonstrates is this: Real educational improvement is possible with a continued commitment to students’ and families’ needs for more quality schools, and we carry this out through the principles of greater access and equity, collaboration, and advocacy. None of the progress thus far would have been possible without that commitment. When community stakeholders put the future of our children ahead of every other priority, positive change happens. That’s the lesson of the past eight years, and it’s a lesson that can provide valuable insight not just for our next eight years here in Newark, but for communities around the nation seeking to give all children the opportunity to achieve at high levels and realize their fullest potential.
Quality & Growth

As a truly successful school grows in size, it will also grow in quality, particularly in terms of students’ academic performance. Newark charter schools have done just that, not only maintaining high standards of quality as the sector has quadrupled from serving 8 percent to about 33 percent of Newark’s public school students in the past eight years, but also improving quality along the way and setting the example for other urban charter sectors.

One of the Nation’s Top Performing Charter Sectors

Multiple studies have confirmed the quality of Newark’s charter sector. In its 2015 Urban Charter School study, Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found that Newark’s charter schools ranked second in the country out of 41 cities studied in both reading and math impact.

Additionally, a 2015 study by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) identified Newark as a national “outlier” in school performance. Based on their data, more than 86 percent of Newark charter school students are enrolled in schools considered to be “beating the odds” in math, and 76 percent are enrolled in schools considered to be “beating the odds” in reading. This means that these schools outperformed other schools in the state with similar demographics. This record of impressive quality speaks for itself. Charter schools are providing unprecedented opportunities for the students of Newark.

These results were confirmed with the first administration of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test in 2015. After decades of public school students in Newark performing far below the state average, students in grades 3-8 in Newark’s charters passed the exam at about the same rate as all other students in New Jersey. This is particularly impressive given the percentages of historically under-served student populations
attending Newark’s charters: about 83 percent of students are African American and 82 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch compared to the statewide averages of 16 percent and 37 percent, respectively. This means that African American students and economically disadvantaged students in Newark’s charter schools passed at a rate far higher than their peers throughout the state, nearly closing the gap in performance between them and their white and affluent peers.

Note: Pass rates for African American and economically disadvantaged students are based on all of the non-redacted data that the New Jersey Department of Education has made publicly available for each test and school.
Increasing Quality

The quality that can be observed in the Newark charter sector is not static; rather, it continues to increase over time. The long-term data shows charter schools in Newark coming into alignment with New Jersey averages over time. This is particularly impressive considering the fact that Newark is among the least affluent municipalities in the state and for decades has significantly trailed state averages for academic achievement.
Perhaps the most remarkable factor in these improvements is that they were accomplished in the midst of shrinking education budgets and burgeoning charter school student populations by maintaining a commitment to excellent outcomes for children.
Growing the Sector

As student achievement across the sector has continued to improve, Newark’s charter schools have served a steadily increasing percentage of Newark’s students each year. One of the top priorities of the Newark Charter School Fund has been seeding the quality growth of the charter sector. In the first phase of NCSF, this meant supporting the opening of new charter schools, as well as supporting the significant growth in grades or new campuses of existing charter schools. More recently, the Fund has supported the growth of charters undertaking new models to transform and turn around low-performing neighborhood schools. Through all of these means of growth, the size of the charter sector has quadrupled, from serving about 3,900 of Newark’s 45,000 students in the 2007-2008 school year to nearly 15,700 students in the 2015-2016 school year (see chart below).

Note: This graph assumes 45,000 total students in public schools (traditional and charter) in Newark. The percentage for the 2015-2016 school year was calculated using data reported to NCSF by the schools, accounting for growth to 47,000 total students in Newark.
Supporting Quality Growth

Part of this success is the result of investments the Fund has made to support the building of capacity of charter schools. To grow a high-quality charter sector at Newark’s robust expansion rate has required more qualified people, additional skills, and supplemental operational dollars to enhance programs. Through direct grants to expanding schools, partnerships with best-in-class leadership development organizations, and support for attracting and retaining the best people for the work in Newark, NCSF has ensured that quality grew as the number of students in charter seats increased.

To grow a high-quality charter sector at Newark’s robust expansion rate has required more qualified people, additional skills, and enhanced programs.

A good education starts with good teachers, and NCSF has worked hand in hand with a number of organizations focused on ensuring strong talent in charters. One key partnership is with Teach for America-N.J., an organization that recruits sufficient numbers of driven teachers, allowing each school to provide more comprehensive services for their students. The partnership has changed over the years, seeking to fill the most urgent needs for talented and energetic teachers. For the most recent school year, funding for Teach for America placements in charter schools was specifically focused on recruiting teachers for students with disabilities.

Through partnerships with the New Teachers Center and the National Academy of Advanced Teacher Education, the Fund has supported professional development for both new and experienced teachers. NCSF has also funded the work of New Leaders and Relay Graduate School of Education to raise up new school leaders and provide further training to current principals.

The Fund is also working with partners to support, place, and train passionate, involved charter board members to strengthen charter governance, ensure that new members are reflective of the communities served by Newark’s charters, and take initiative toward collaboration and the sharing of best practices with other charter schools.

15K+ students in Newark charter schools in the 2015-2016 school year
This commitment to the people behind a high-quality education has contributed to an increased number of skilled and committed individuals leading charter schools, teaching in the classrooms, and serving on charter boards. Together, these leaders drive continued student success at every level.

**Continuing the Impact of Quality Growth**

The Newark Charter School Fund has helped in leading the way to ensure that parents have options and that an increasing number of students have access to a high-quality public education at a charter school. In applications for the 2015-2016 school year, parents confirmed that they value this work. The top seven schools parents requested for their K-8 students through universal enrollment during the first round were charter schools, a testament to these schools’ high level of quality and to the hope that a quality education can inspire in families across the city. In the most recent survey conducted by NCSF in 2014, the majority of Newarkers (55 percent) supported expansion of charter schools in the city.

In the future, continued academic quality on the part of Newark charter schools will require clear priorities and an even greater commitment to provide educational opportunity for all. As the charter sector continues to grow, it must remain committed to the highest standards of quality and accountability.
Not very many teenagers understand how important it is to have teachers who have high expectations for us. A lot of the time, we react as if they're being too hard on us.

Before I started attending People's Prep almost three years ago, I didn't know what it was like to have a teacher who really cared about me and wanted to see me go to, and graduate from, college. For the first time, I have teachers who care if I understand the lessons or do my homework. I now know what it's like to have teachers who push me and my classmates to really achieve.

"Great teachers know what we're capable of and want us to succeed..."

Great teachers do care about their students, which means they expect their students to try their best. At People's Prep, the teachers are always pushing us out of our comfort zones to learn new things and stick to deadlines. Great teachers know what we're capable of and want us to succeed, so they provide feedback that is constructive instead of critical, that will help us grow and mature.

Great teachers invest time in their students beyond what's expected. They stay after school and give their free time to help their students. They give you their phone numbers and email addresses to use if you need help with anything. Even if it's not related to their subject, they'll find a way to help you. They reach out to you and ask if you need help because they know some kids aren't comfortable asking for it. That's the kind of teachers I've had at People's Prep.

I will be attending Dillard University in Louisiana in the fall. I'm going to be studying sociology so I can eventually become a social worker or practice family law. I want to be able to help people live better lives. That would never have been a realistic goal for me if I hadn't been to People's Prep and had great teachers who expected me to succeed and helped me all along the way. I'll always be thankful for them.

Jalisa Mitchell is presently a freshman at Dillard University.
Access & Equity

One of the Newark Charter School Fund’s foundational principles is that all students deserve access to a high-quality education that will prepare them to enroll in college and attain a career. The tremendous growth of the charter sector has expanded access to these types of educational options for thousands of families across the city.

92% of 2015 KIPP Newark Collegiate Academy graduates went on to college.

Pictured: Patience Marks, Boston College, Class of 2015
Serving All Students

As Newark’s charter sector has grown, it has continued to serve diverse, high-need student populations at increasing levels. This includes serving students who live at or near the poverty level. The charter sector’s combined free and reduced-price lunch student population of 82 percent roughly matches that of the district’s population, both of which are high for the state of New Jersey.

The Newark charter sector also serves a high proportion of African American students, who have particularly benefited from the growth of the city’s charter sector. In the 2013-2014 school year, 80 percent of charter students were black, compared to 51 percent of district students. The percentage of black students in Newark enrolled in any public school above the state proficiency average has more than tripled from 6 percent in 2006 to 20 percent in 2014. This change has largely been driven by the charter sector; 44 percent of black charter school students were enrolled in a school that beat the state proficiency average in the 2013-2014 school year.

Source: “The Prize: The Unwritten Appendix, By Those Inside Newark’s Improving Schools,” Andrew Martin, The 74.

83% of Newark charter students were African American in the 2014-2015 school year.
Perhaps nowhere is the need for equal access to quality educational options more critical than in the education of students with special needs. Over the past eight years, the charter sector has made incredible strides in improving access for these students requiring additional supports to be successful.

Between 2008-2009 and the 2014-2015 school year, the percentage of students with special needs in Newark charter schools substantially increased from 6 percent to 10 percent. Moreover, enrollment in charters of students with special needs continues to increase as a result of the universal enrollment initiative. In the application cycle for the 2015-2016 school year, about 15 percent of incoming ninth graders who were matched to a charter school had special needs.

One of the advantages of the public charter school model is that charter schools are able to move quickly to adopt or adapt instructional strategies to support individual student needs, including those of special education students. In addition, charter schools usually possess greater hiring flexibility, allowing them to bring on appropriate staff or consultants to serve the particular needs of these children.

To continue to build additional capacity within the sector to serve the special-needs population, NSCF supported the launch of the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools'
(NCSECS) work in Newark. This partnership and focus has resulted in a number of schools increasing special education staffing, creating of special services leadership positions, and dedicating summer professional development time to this important area.

Moreover, the Fund has supported NCSECS’ work to create a network of special educators in Newark’s charters, providing training, resources, and a monthly forum for special educators to gather and share best practices. Increasing equity for under-served populations such as students with special needs continues to be a focus for the Newark Charter School Fund.

“It takes patience to help a child with special needs. A teacher must have the training, skills, understanding, and love to nurture a special-needs child. Most of all, a teacher needs the infrastructure and support so they can do their jobs. KIPP SPARK Academy provides the environment needed for both our kids and our teachers.”

— Dreya Drayton
KIPP New Jersey parent

**Universal Enrollment**

The city’s universal enrollment initiative, which has strong participation by the charter sector, has also contributed to increased access for parents and families to charters by simplifying the application process for charters and other public school options.

Prior to the 2014-2015 academic year, each charter school operated its own application and enrollment process. As the number of options grew, discovering, learning about, and applying to multiple schools became a headache for parents who simply wanted the best school for their child.

That’s why the majority of Newark charter schools demonstrated leadership as a sector, and with the strong support of the Newark Charter School Fund, joined forces with Newark Public Schools and opted in to participate in the universal enrollment system.
Under universal enrollment, parents fill out a single application to rank their top public charter or district school choices, accessing all the education options in Newark using a single application and making the process more transparent and easier for parents to use. An independent algorithm assigns students to seats based on those preferences and other factors, ensuring that the enrollment process is fair and that all students have equal access to high-quality schools.

Universal enrollment hasn’t only streamlined the application process; it has also increased transparency to ensure Newark families that all students have fair and equitable access to educational opportunity.

**Universal Enrollment Applications for the 2015-2016 School Year**

- **76%** of applicants in Round 1 were matched to a school within their top 3 choices
- **63%** of applicants listed a charter school on their application
- **42%** of applicants listed a charter school as their first choice
Promoting access to educational options has not been without its challenges, but Newark charter schools have benefited from effective efforts over the past eight years to secure and protect expanded access. In the coming years, the Newark Charter School Fund will continue to support efforts to develop innovative partnerships between the charter sector and the district, and to expand access to a high-quality education for all students, including those with special needs.

82% of Newark charter students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.
For those who think charter schools don't serve special-needs students, they should hear my son's story.

For years, I was at a loss and desperate. My third-grader had special needs, but he didn't seem to be getting the help he needed. He couldn't read. He didn't write. The teachers told me he didn't socialize, he made trouble and he didn't follow directions. I asked for help. They mostly shrugged.

My son hated school. He was bullied for being different, and he never felt part of the class. He'd come home with mostly empty notebooks, except for doodles of little animals.

I begged teachers and principals for help. I demanded help at the Board of Education offices. I hired a lawyer. Nothing seemed to make a difference. As my son got older, I worried, what would become of him without the skills that every mother hopes for her child. I cried. How will my son ever make it in this world if he can't read and he can't get along with others?

"They really saw my son for who he is, a special boy with incredible potential. He came alive because of his teachers. I am forever grateful."

Then one day, someone suggested that I apply for North Star Academy Charter School. A blue-ribbon school? Even though North Star is a public school that takes all children, I thought it was impossible that they would take my son. At the orientation at the North Star Alexander campus, I waited until all the other parents left to approach the principal. I was embarrassed to talk about my story in front of the other parents. Such is the shame that I learned to feel after years of being turned away when seeking help for my son in district schools.
I told her about my son, and she didn't even flinch. I was direct with her: Don't take him in now only to throw him out in two weeks when you figure out you can't help him. I was used to people not wanting my son in their school.

She smiled and said, "We can help."

Within a month, I couldn't believe his transformation. My son liked school. He'd get up early to go to school, happily. He was socializing, following directions. My son was happy! Gone were the phone calls I'd get at work complaining about my son. These teachers called with good news and with his accomplishments.

They really saw my son for who he is, a special boy with incredible potential. He came alive because of his teachers. I am forever grateful.

Within six months, my now fourth-grader, who had came to North Star on a kindergarten level, had learned to read on a third-grade level. He learned to do math. When we had a question about the homework, we'd call the teacher, and she called us back! Never had I imagined that would happen.

Today, my son has great ambitions, despite the challenges that lay ahead. He wants to go to college. No, he knows he's going to college. He wants to be a businessman one day, and I now believe he can do it.
Collaboration

If Newark is to succeed in expanding access to a high-quality education for all students in the city, it will be through collaboration that prioritizes children’s needs. Everyone involved in the process — from administrators and policymakers to educators, parents, and even students — must unite across the district and charter sectors around a vision for Newark education that prepares all students for college and a career.

Putting students’ best interests first requires everyone to put aside their differences, end the “us versus them” mentality that has derailed similar efforts in other parts of the country, and work together to find solutions that will serve the needs of all families.

Uniting the Charter Community

Over the eight years of its existence, the Fund has come to serve as a critical organizational backbone for the charter sector itself, to help address sector-specific issues and gaps, as well as push the sector toward critical goals around equity, transparency, and accountability.

In an effort to facilitate collaboration, the Newark Charter School Fund began hosting monthly Community Advisory Group (CAG) meetings in 2010. The CAG meetings, attended by charter

The Newark Charter School Fund is committed to fostering productive collaboration, both among the charter schools and between the charter sector and the Newark Public Schools district.
school leaders from across the city, as well as by key partners, were launched with three specific goals: to build a strong foundation, engage all charters, and cultivate thriving schools. Through the CAG meetings, the charter community shares ideas, builds consensus, and works together to achieve the overarching goal to help Newark’s students succeed.

Through the CAG meetings, it became clear that a statement of common principles would be valuable in guiding the long-term work of the sector. The Newark Charter School Compact was launched in 2011 and now unifies and commits participating charter schools under a common vision on four fronts:

• Serving all students in the city, especially the highest-need students requiring special education services, students who are English Language Learners, students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, and other under-served and at-risk populations.

• Ensuring transparency and accountability in schools’ efforts to meet high expectations.

• Collaborating with one another and with the city to improve educational options and outcomes, including sharing parent resources, advocacy tools, and best practices, and to avoid using sector-wide events as an opportunity to recruit one another’s staff.

Newark Charter School Compact Principles

- Serving ALL Students
- Data Transparency & Accountability
- Charter & District Collaboration
- Parent & Family Engagement
• Elevating the voices of parents and families as key stakeholders in the conversation about school options and choice through consistent and open communication and the engagement of parents to serve as representatives on various school committees.

Each year, Newark charter schools re-sign this compact to ensure that, collectively and individually, charters are upholding the principles contained therein. Even more broadly, the compact has come to serve as a bedrock for collaboration among the charter schools, the philanthropic community and key stakeholders who work together to fulfill the vision that every child has access to a quality school.

Collaboration Between District and Charter Schools

The need for collaboration doesn’t apply only within the charter sector. The goal of providing the best possible education to as many students as possible means that charters must also come together with district schools to best meet the needs of Newark’s children.

To this end, over the past eight years, the Newark Charter School Fund has supported a number of efforts to foster this type of collaboration, including a partnership with Schools That Can (STC). Through STC, teachers from district and charter schools have come together for professional development on Common Core and PARCC implementation; best practices sharing; and round tables on special education, technology, and English Language Learners.
Another partner, Uncommon Schools North Star Academy, has been collaborating with leaders and hosting district teachers and leaders at its Great Habits, Great Readers professional development literacy workshops.

In addition, an important way in which charters and the district have collaborated is around school facilities. Currently, nine charter schools are located in district buildings and two of them are co-located in the same building as a district school. These co-locations have presented great opportunities for charter and district schools to share best practices, like at KIPP Seek Academy, which shares space with George Washington Carver Elementary School. Seek and Carver have partnered in campuswide events, field trips, and staff professional development.

Perhaps the best example of collaborative innovation between Newark Public Schools and the charter sector is the universal enrollment program, Newark Enrolls, mentioned in the Access & Equity section of this report. Since the launch of the Newark Enrolls initiative, NCSF has functioned as a critical liaison between the district and charter schools on a variety of policy design issues and has provided support on an array of fronts, including outreach to parents and the community.

Without collaboration — both within the sector and among the sector, the city, and other stakeholders — much of what has been accomplished in Newark over the past eight years would have been impossible. For the progress to be permanent, we must remain committed to that same spirit of collaboration, putting aside ego and parochial interests to work together to ensure a better future for Newark’s children.

Approximately 90% of Uncommon Schools North Star Academy high school graduates enroll in four-year universities after graduation.
When we think about how to achieve our vision for great public schools in Newark, we must start with a simple question: How can we provide all students with access to a free, high quality public education?

If each and every person with a stake in the education of Newark’s students kept that question front and center, it would change our discourse and help us avoid the challenges that have, unfortunately, previously stalled progress in this city.

Education, after all, is about creating a better future for our children — it is an inherently unselfish activity, so the key to collaboration between the charter sector and the Newark school system is an enthusiastic embrace of high quality education options, no matter what our personal stake.

In order for our students to succeed, we have to be willing to work together as leaders, partners and community members. In order for us to support all of our students, the focus shouldn’t be about how a school comes into existence, but rather on whether or not a school is providing the best possible education to its students.

"[T]he key to collaboration between the charter sector and the Newark school system is an enthusiastic embrace of high quality education options, no matter what our personal stake."

The proof is in the progress. Students in Newark are beating the odds, as evidenced by research from the Center for Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington. In a recent study designed to assess educational opportunity in 50 major cities around the country, CRPE found that while only 8 percent of students nationally are enrolled in schools that are “beating the odds,” Newark students are enrolled in schools that beat the odds in math and reading at rates of 39 and 38 percent, respectively.
The list of schools that are beating the odds is composed of a diverse array of school types and configurations including traditional public, charter and magnet schools. It is the combination of these options that produced these results, and our students’ future success largely depends on how well we collaborate with and learn from each other.

We’ve managed to beat the odds with this approach so far, and I remain hopeful that we can assure a brighter future for our children by remaining committed to that same spirit of partnership.
Charter schools are public schools; however, they do not receive public funding for facilities like district schools. And they do not receive public funding to buy, renovate, or lease school buildings.

One more way that some charter schools have met the challenge of finding facilities is by co-location, essentially moving into district school buildings and using a surplus of space in a public school building. This is the case with Seek Academy, a KIPP New Jersey elementary school that shares space with George Washington Carver Elementary and Bruce Street School.

One of the benefits of co-location is that the schools have the opportunity to learn best practices from one another, and this has been the case with Seek Academy and the schools it shares space with. We have partnered with Carver on campuswide events, including Carver Day and Gender Empowerment Day, where we had guest speakers and joint learning activities. Representatives from our staff just returned from a personal development workshop in upstate New York together so they could turnkey best practices to the rest of the staff. We also took Carver students with us on field trips to Monmouth University, Long Branch Beach, Rutgers Camden and the Camden Aquarium.

"One of the benefits of co-location is that the schools have the opportunity to learn best practices from one another, and this has been the case with Seek Academy and the schools it shares space with."

Seek Academy is currently in a short-term lease, which has us at the mercy of shifting district policies and political winds. It also leaves us with the uncertainty of whether the place we’re currently occupying is in fact our final home. We are hoping to secure a long-term lease in this space so that we can make it our long-term home and continue to share
our resources with the George Washington Carver Elementary and Bruce Street School to benefit all children in the building.

Our scholars are not objects that can just be moved from location to location. For many students, school serves as a second home, and without a long-term solution they feel the effects of potentially being displaced. Additionally, it is hard to invest and make facilities improvements that would benefit all of the schools sharing the building when you're not certain if you'll be there year to year.

Collectively, we want the best for all of the schools we share space with. Newark children deserve a great public school system that is fair to the children, parents, and community, and right now, the students of Seek Academy are left in limbo.
Advocacy

One of the key roles of the Newark Charter School Fund over the past eight years has been to serve as an ambassador and advocate on behalf of the charter sector. In this role, the Fund has advocated for and supported policy efforts to impact charters at the state and local level. The Fund has also supported the engagement of charter school parents about sector issues, as well as the broader parent and stakeholder community about charter school options in Newark.

Supporting and Protecting the Quality Growth of Charters

Over the course of the Fund’s existence, it has engaged in a variety of advocacy efforts aimed at protecting the progress of the charter sector and making it easier to implement lasting improvements. Focus areas include advancing the reauthorization of a strong state charter school law to ensure a high-quality bar for charters in New Jersey and promoting charters’ access to affordable facilities — a long-standing issue for Newark’s charters — to keep them on track to their state-approved growth trajectory.

More recently, the Newark Charter School Fund has worked in close partnership with a variety of advocacy-focused partner organizations and charter school leaders to form a multipronged coalition to support the charter sector’s need for solid policies under which it can grow and thrive.

The collective efforts of this coalition have proved extremely valuable: In the past year alone, this coalition of advocacy partners has come together to successfully combat midyear charter moratorium efforts in both Trenton and Newark, which resulted in a large, high-profile parent rally; thousands of letters and phone calls to state legislators; several hundred parents and community members turning out at a public hearing to support charter facilities;
"It’s important that parents have options and can choose the school that best fits their child. I know how education changed my life. I want for my child and our children the same thing that was provided for me. But I do realize that no one person, agency, or elected official has the capacity to do it alone. So we rely on one another as pillars of strength, partners, and allies in the fight of our lives. That’s why I believe we must continue funding high-quality public charter schools here in Newark, but also ensure money reaches classrooms in traditional public schools as well."

— Christine Carter
Mother of three students; two at Rafael Hernandez School and one at Uncommon Schools North Star Academy
As a former Newark public school student and the parent of a child who is blessed to attend one of Newark’s charter schools, I can’t believe that some state legislators are trying to prevent charter schools from expanding to reach more kids. Parents in Newark and across New Jersey need to stand up against the moratorium bill, which threatens to cut off access to a great education for students across the state.

My son Tanner enrolled in Marion P. Thomas Charter School’s pre-kindergarten program in 2013, when he was just 4 years old. Tanner has always been a bright kid, but the school’s innovative curriculum, hard work, and the dedication of his teachers have developed him into a young leader already. He is starting his own sock, tie, and accessories company called Krazi Legz & Things, and by the time he enters college will have started several more companies. He says he will be the next black president.

I wish every family in Newark had access to the options my family has had, but some lawmakers in Trenton now want to limit how many children can attend charter schools.

"The last thing we need is for lawmakers in Trenton to put progress on hold and limit our freedom to choose the best school for our kids."

The last thing we need is for lawmakers in Trenton to put progress on hold and limit our freedom to choose the best school for our kids. How am I supposed to explain to my son that his best friend couldn’t have the same chances in life because lawmakers didn’t like the school he loves, a school that even at his young age is preparing him for great things?
Building Trust with Parents in the Community

The Fund has sought to build support and momentum within the broader community for charters and education reform by investing in other groups that share its vision for high-quality education in Newark. That includes those organizations that work directly with Newark’s parent population. The Fund has also made major strides in building relationships with community leaders in Newark.

"We are not saviors coming in to save the community. We are a part of the community."

— Juliana Worrell
Associate Managing Director, Uncommon Schools and Former Principal at North Star Alexander Street Elementary School

More recently, the Fund supported the launch of two parent-focused organizations, the Parent Coalition for Excellent Education (PC2E) and the Black Alliance for Educational Options-New Jersey (BAEO-NJ), which provide a platform for Newark charter and other parents, whose voices have historically gone unheard in community discussions on education. These locally grounded organizations are working with local stakeholders to help to create awareness about education policies, dispel common myths about charter schools and, more broadly, build trust in the community to engage in a broad discussion about public school options.

Together with Fund-supported, school-based advocacy efforts from KIPP and North Star, scores of parents throughout the Newark community are being reached through charter school parent outreach, neighborhood block parties, and local church and community events. Efforts such as North Star’s Parent Academy are building bridges with parents and community members to help offer needed services like GED courses and engage them to support their children and schools.
The mission of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) is to increase access to high-quality educational options for black children by actively supporting transformational education reform initiatives and parental-choice policies that empower low-income and working-class black families. One of the ways BAEO realizes this mission is through the creation of state clergy coalitions. Through these vital coalitions, BAEO convenes, educates, and empowers local members of the clergy to advocate for education reform.

Tremendous opportunities exist for our black churches to be involved in New Jersey’s educational future, particularly in Newark, where there are more than 500 faith-based houses of worship.

Centers of faith often serve as local, respected pillars of the community and are uniquely situated to share information and serve as advocates for their congregations — who sometimes are the most affected by changes, but may have received the least information about how those changes will affect their children.

Moreover, sometimes houses of worship can serve as partners to nearby schools, helping to provide additional services to students in need, or even providing space to growing schools.

BAEO of New Jersey will continue reaching out to the faith-based community to ensure as many families as possible are engaged in this important work of strengthening Newark's public schools and providing high-quality educational options for children who need it most.
Debunking Myths and Sharing Real Stories About the Impact of Newark’s Charters

As the Fund has sought to bring quality school-choice options to Newark, it has found a consistent need for communicating and engaging with parents and community leaders alike. Sharing facts — including that all charter schools are public schools, every school is tuition-free, admission isn’t dependent on grades or test scores and that they are open to all children, including those with special needs — has been critical in debunking common myths. The Fund launched a paid media campaign, including ads on buses and billboards, cable-TV ads, and posters in local businesses, such as bodegas and barbershops.

That’s one of the reasons the Fund, with the support of other partners, also launched the “My Child, My Choice” (MCMC) public awareness campaign in 2015. MCMC represents the collective interests of students, parents, charter schools, and supporting organizations that share the goal of improving educational outcomes in Newark.

The campaign, which highlights real stories about the impact of Newark’s charter sector on our community, is dispelling many of the commonly held myths about charter schools by giving a public voice to three key points of emphasis:

- Charter schools serve all students, including those with the highest need;
- Charter schools hire quality teachers who are committed to their students’ success; and
- Charter schools deserve equal access to school facilities so they can serve students well.
The MCMC public awareness campaign included a variety of methods to share stories from real Newark parents as well as from school leaders and other leading stakeholders — from blog posts to charter school spotlights and videos.

The past eight years of the Fund’s involvement in Newark have helped the sector successfully protect and grow charter school enrollment and increase the access Newark families have to real educational choices. In the coming years, there’s no doubt that challenges will continue to present themselves, and that the Fund’s advocacy efforts will continue to play a large part in confronting those challenges effectively.

With a continued, enduring commitment to engagement and partnerships with parents, administrators, teachers, and other key stakeholders in the community, the Newark Charter School Fund will continue to bring real, substantive change to the city of Newark.
92% of Marion P. Thomas Charter School seniors have been accepted at colleges, universities, and culinary programs.
Lessons Learned and the Path Forward

As a retrospective endeavor, this report provides us with a clear picture of where the Newark Charter School Fund has come from, and of what has driven success in the areas of quality growth, access and equity, collaboration, and advocacy. But perhaps its most important use is as a guide for understanding the future of the Fund and the broader education system in Newark.

The public charter school sector in Newark has grown tremendously since 2008 and has worked hard to do so in a way that preserves and strengthens quality along the way. As the sector continues to grow, it’s important to remember that quality growth isn’t isolated from the Newark school system at large. Newark’s charters are an integral part of Newark’s public school system, and the increase in educational options for parents and school quality is creating benefits across the system that changes the status quo and will have a positive impact for years to come.

As the sector grows, we must redouble our commitment to providing all students with access to a high-quality education that will prepare them for and help ensure they get enrolled in college. The Fund must — and will — continue to ensure that the charter sector is striving to reach all students, ensuring that high-need students are offered the same educational options as all other students.

In order to accomplish that goal, the charter sector must continue to work hand in hand with parents and other community stakeholders, the Newark public school system and city leadership, and other local partners toward critical goals of equity, transparency, and accountability.

Collaboration always presents challenges, and chief among them is ensuring that all stakeholders have a voice in the process. Many in the community who are just as committed to an excellent education for their children as we are have expressed concerns about being left out of the process. Moreover, as the charter sector has grown quickly in recent years, there has been understandable pushback raised by many in the community about what the implications will be for the broader system of public schools.
Going forward, we must continue to find ways to build bridges in the community and elevate and include the voices of parents and the community in the vision for Newark’s public schools.

Ultimately, if Newark is to continue to benefit from collaboration, the focus must remain on serving the best interest of students, and to fight together — instead of against one another — for what those solutions are.

For our part, the Fund must consistently and cohesively communicate to all involved that, rather than existing as a separate set of schools, charters are fully part of the city’s ecosystem of public schools, all of which are committed to providing the best possible educational options to Newark students.

There isn’t a single story that communicates the entirety of what’s happening in Newark, which is why we must continue listening to everyone’s stories and providing more vehicles for parents and students to let their voices be heard. In fact, the path forward will be illuminated by the stories of the very people these schools are for.

There is much from our past experiences that can provide clarity for the future. The Fund is, in many ways, on the brink of major changes. While we’re excited that Newark charter schools have the privilege of serving fully one-third of Newark’s students, one of the largest proportions in the nation, our sector is poised for continued growth to serve the thousands of parents and families still seeking charter school options in the city.

As we pursue greater levels of access to educational opportunity, we must remember that quality, access, and collaboration are the keys to a future that is even brighter than our past. It’s this commitment to high ideals and exceptional school quality that will allow us to forge a path into the future, positioning Newark as a beacon of educational excellence that will serve as a model for the rest of the nation.
What Key State and Local Leaders Are Saying About NCSF and Newark Charters

“We have and will continue to support the expansion of high-quality charter schools as one way to ensure that all students have great educational options available to them. Every student in New Jersey deserves a choice of where they attend school, not only to ensure that no child is assigned to a failing school, but also so that families can select a school that gives their child the best opportunity for success, and I am grateful to them for the work they do on behalf of our students.”

— Chris Christie
Governor of New Jersey

“We have a moral and ethical duty to ensure that all students have the opportunity to receive a quality education. Every parent should have the right to choose a school that meets their child’s needs, whether that be traditional public schools, charter schools, interdistrict-school placements, vocational schools, or private schools.”

— David C. Hespe
New Jersey Commissioner of Education

“For decades, our most important area of interest has been the education of Newark’s children. In recent years, we have been impressed by the accomplishments of the charter school sector in Newark, and believe this collaboration has great potential to improve public school options for Newark’s neediest students.”

— Irene Cooper-Basch
Executive Officer of the Victoria Foundation
“All students deserve to be academically prepared to compete for quality jobs in the global economy. The Newark Charter School Fund continues to play a critical role in improving the quality of the education in the city of Newark. NCSF not only provides financial support, technical assistance, and advocacy to ensure all charter schools are performing at a high level, but also leads important collaborative initiatives, like universal enrollment, with the Newark Public Schools.”

— Shané Harris

V.P., Corporate Giving and Executive Director, the Prudential Foundation

“NCSF consistently partners with schools to address the ever-changing landscape and challenges faced by school leaders. This has been a critical factor in Marion P. Thomas Charter School's ability to build capacity and improve instructional quality. I applaud the Fund's work to galvanize the charter sector around vital issues, as well as the invaluable support they have provided that has impacted both students and families.”

— Dr. Karen Thomas

Founder & CEO, Marion P. Thomas Charter School

“Time and time again, the Fund and its leadership have brought diverse parties together to address a common goal: better educational opportunities and outcomes for all of Newark’s children. Whether it was rallying district, charter, government, and community to achieve universal enrollment, facilities for new school options, or transitional funding for the district, Mashea Ashton used her credibility as a former teacher and longtime educator with deep relationships in the city to get it done! She acknowledges differences while building bridges at the same time, and the magnitude of improvement in educational outcomes in Newark could not have happened without her.”

— Misha Simmonds

Executive Director, University Heights Charter School
APPENDIX

Compact for Newark Charter Schools

The Newark charter schools agree to this compact to ensure that, collectively and individually, Newark charter schools are upholding the highest principles of transparency and public accountability, serving an unmet need in Newark, striving for educational excellence, and fulfilling their missions to educate all students in the most equitable manner possible.

This compact will serve as an agreement among the charter schools, philanthropic community, and key stakeholders to fulfill this vision. Charters will report data needed to monitor this compact in their annual report to the state. Any charter that is unable or unwilling to fulfill the terms and spirit of the compact will face the loss of support from the other signatories.

We anticipate the future development of a charter-district compact that will specify the ways in which charter and the district schools can work together to achieve a collective agenda that ensures all students have access to excellent schools.

Our primary objective is to ensure that every child in Newark is enrolled in a great school, regardless of whether it is operated by the district or under a charter. Today, Newark charter schools provide meaningful educational options for thousands of high-need students and families. Although there is a range of performance within Newark’s charter sector, some of the city’s highest performing schools are charter schools. To ensure that all students and families have great schools to choose from, we are committed to increasing the number of high-quality charter schools in Newark through the continuous improvement of all charter schools, the expansion of successful schools, and the development of promising new schools. We also affirm the underlying premise of the charter school law that chronically low-performing charter schools should be closed.

Compact Signers for the 2015-2016 School Year

Discovery Charter School
Great Oaks Charter School
KIPP New Jersey
Lady Liberty Academy Charter School
Link Community Charter School
Marion P. Thomas Charter School
Merit Preparatory Charter School
Newark Educators’ Community Charter School
Newark Legacy Charter School
Newark Preparatory Charter School
Paulo Freire Charter School
People’s Preparatory Charter School
Philip’s Academy Charter School
Robert Treat Academy Charter School
Roseville Community Charter School
Uncommon Schools North Star Academy
University Heights Charter School
Under this compact, we the undersigned charter schools, funders and stakeholders commit to the following:

1. Serving all students in the city, especially the highest-need students requiring special education services, students who are English Language Learners, students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and other under-served or at-risk populations, by:
   a. Recruiting and advertising for our schools in the widest and most inclusive manner possible.
   b. Eliminating any process steps or requirements of parents before the charter application and lotteries are completed, and actively correcting misinformation about any application or lottery requirements for parents. For example, charter schools may participate in Newark’s universal enrollment system, Newark Enrolls; charters will not require families or students to attend information sessions to apply to their schools or enter the lottery; charters will offer optional informational sessions.
   c. Providing multiple ways for charter families and students to access and complete an application, including posting an application online, providing a mail-in application, and allowing in-person drop off of applications at our schools.
   d. Communicating clear messages that students with special education needs, students who are English Language Learners, and other at-risk students are served by charter schools and correcting any misinformation about charter schools.
   e. Ensuring that all staff members are abiding by the legal requirements for the application and lottery processes.
   f. Agreeing to carefully monitor and minimize attrition rates.

2. Posting transparent data in full compliance with NJDOE policies on our websites in one place regarding the following:
   a. The number and percentage of students served who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, students with special education needs, and students who are English Language Learners.
   b. Mobility rates currently reported to the state and reporting year-over-year attrition rates using October 15th enrollment counts for the year-to-year comparison.
   c. Suspension and expulsion rates, using a consistent calculation across the charter sector for both.
   d. In addition, charter high schools will report high school persistence and college matriculation rates as a function of 9th grade enrollment.
   e. Working collaboratively to create a common accountability system that is fair, transparent, and prioritizes student outcomes. Charters will continue to share data with NPS for the production of annual school guidebook.

3. Collaborating as a charter sector and with Newark Public Schools to be a part of the solution for improving educational options and outcomes for all students, in both charter and district schools by:
   a. Working with the district to locate new schools in highest-need areas.
   b. In partnership with the district, developing a clear plan to ensure all public resources, including school buildings, are put to the best possible use.
   c. Engaging across the district and charter sector with parents, students, and community leaders to develop solution-oriented options.
   d. Sharing demonstrated best practices in order to scale up what works.
   e. Ensuring all Newark students have teachers who will help them reach their full academic potential and care about their well-being.
   f. Collaborating on information resources for parents to apprise them of all charter school options across Newark and NPS options as well.
   g. Sharing parent advocacy tools and other resources for parents.
   h. Focusing public comments on high-quality schools and parental choice, rather than charter-district competition.
   i. Agreeing to avoid using common charter sector-wide events and trainings as opportunities to recruit one another’s staff. Healthy competition across charters is of course welcome, but commonly planned professional development or other charter-sector meetings will not be used to recruit staff from one charter to another.

4. Elevating the voice of parents as key stakeholders in the conversation about school options and choice by:
   a. Communicating regularly and openly about school performance.
   b. Keeping parents informed of changes in the charter environment and the impact those changes will have on their school options.
   c. Engaging parents to serve as representatives on various school committees.
The mission of the Newark Charter School Fund (NCSF) is to support the quality, growth, and sustainability of the charter sector in order to provide all of Newark’s students with access to great schools in collaboration with district efforts to improve the quality of Newark public education.