

# Partners in Closing the Achievement Gap:

*How Charter Schools Can Support High-  
Quality Universal Pre-K*



**DEMOCRATS**  
*for* **EDUCATION REFORM**

*Policy Briefing Memo*

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# DEMOCRATS for EDUCATION REFORM

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*Democrats for Education Reform aims to return the Democratic Party to its rightful place as a champion of children in America's public education systems.*

*The views expressed in this briefing memo are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Democrats for Education Reform*

Over the past eight years, states have dramatically expanded their support for publicly-funded pre-k programs, and the number of children enrolled in these programs has grown significantly<sup>1</sup>. States are investing in pre-k because research shows that high-quality pre-kindergarten programs can have a positive long-term impact on children's life outcomes, help narrow the achievement gap between poor and affluent youngsters, and that the benefits of these investments to children and the taxpaying public outweigh their costs<sup>2</sup>. In other words, high-quality pre-k is a key weapon in the arsenal of public policies that we can use to combat poverty and inequality and strengthen the skills of our workforce for the modern economy.

**By Sara Mead**

A similar argument could be made for charter schools. Charter schools are independent public schools that are publicly funded and accountable to the public for results. More than 4,250 charter schools serve more than 1.2 million students in 40 states and the District of Columbia<sup>3</sup>. Although aggregate charter school performance nationally is mixed, some of our nation's most effective schools in educating disadvantaged youngsters are charters, and charters in several states are outperforming their district-operated public school counterparts<sup>4</sup>.

Both the charter school movement and the universal pre-k movement seek to improve student outcomes and narrow the achievement gap for low-income and minority students. In doing so, both movements are fundamentally redefining the boundaries of public

1. W. Steven Barnett, Jason T. Hustedt, Laura E. Hawkinson, and Kenneth B. Robin, *The State of Preschool 2006*, National Institute for Early Education Research.

(2006) <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf#page=76>

2. See, for instance, Barnett, W. S., *Lives in the Balance: Age-27 Benefit-Cost Analysis of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program*, High/Scope Press, 1996; Schweinhart, L. J., H. V. Barnes, and D. P. Weikart, *Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study*; Ramey, C. T., and F. A. Campbell, "Preventive Education for High-Risk Children: Cognitive Consequences of the Carolina Abecedarian Project," *American Journal of Mental Deficiency*, 88, 515-523, 1984; Ramey, C. T. et al., "Persistent Effects of Early Intervention on High-Risk Children and Their Mothers," *Applied Developmental Science*, 4, 2-14, 2000; Reynolds, A.J., *Success in Early Intervention: The Chicago Child-Parent Centers*, University of Nebraska Press, 2000; Gormley, William T., and Deborah Phillips, "The Effects of Universal Pre-K in Oklahoma: Research Highlights and Policy Implications," CROCUS, Georgetown University, October 2003.

*Through Age 27*, High/Scope Press, 1993.

3. Center for Education Reform <http://www.edreform.com/index.cfm?fuseAction=stateStatChart&psessionid=15&cSectionID=44>

4. Andrew Rotherham and Sara Mead, "A Sum Greater than the Parts: What States Can Teach Each Other About Charter Schooling," *Education Sector* (September 2007). [http://www.educationsector.org/research/research\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=521913](http://www.educationsector.org/research/research_show.htm?doc_id=521913)

## High Quality Pre-kindergarten

*A growing number of charter schools across the country are drawing on a variety of federal, state, and local funding streams to offer high-quality pre-k in a charter setting. Here are a few examples of charter schools offering high-quality pre-K:*

### *The Accelerated School, Los Angeles, California*

The Accelerated School is a nationally recognized charter school in South Central Los Angeles that was identified by Time Magazine as its “school of the year” in 2001. The Accelerated School was founded in 1994 by two Los Angeles Unified School District Teachers, Jonathan Williams and Kevin Sved, and currently serves more than 900 students on four campuses—including 71 pre-kindergartners in its W.M. Keck Early Learning Center Campus, opened in 2005.



The Center’s pre-kindergarten program supports 3-to-5-year-olds in developing a range of readiness skills including a solid foundation in language, literacy and mathematics. It is based on the Reggio Emilia model, which fits well with the Accelerated School’s learner-centered, whole child educational program.

Funding for the Accelerated School’s pre-kindergarten program comes from Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP), which was created by the Los

education—the charter school movement, by enabling entities other than local school districts to operate public schools, and the universal pre-k movement, by extending public education to 3- and 4-year-olds. As they reshape public education, both movements also bring new providers—community-based organizations, non-profits, even for-profit and faith-based providers—into the public education system.

The charter school and universal pre-k movement have the potential to be important partners in improving education for America’s children. But despite their similarities and shared goals, these movements generally operate on separate tracks, with little cooperation or exchange of ideas between the two sectors. That’s unfortunate, because both sectors face similar challenges such as building capacity and ensuring high quality across diverse providers, and could help one another develop solutions. For instance, charter schools offer a potential source of new pre-k capacity. And, by the same token, policies to incorporate charter schools into state pre-k programs could support growth and quality in the charter movement. Because achievement gaps are in place long before children start kindergarten, charter schools seeking to narrow achievement gaps must be able to begin working with children in pre-k.

Democrats for Education Reform believes that charter schools have a critical role to play in the pre-k movement. Pre-k advocates and state policymakers must seize on the potential of charter schools to support the expansion of high-quality public pre-k programs. To do this, they must ensure that state policies enable charter schools to take part in state-funded pre-k programs. This policy brief explains why charter schools are an important ally for the pre-k movement, looks at the challenges charter schools face in becoming pre-k providers, and recommends policy changes to capitalize on the potential of charter schools to support high-quality pre-k.

### *Overlooking a Valuable Source of Pre-K Capacity*

Policymakers tend to focus on asking where the money for pre-k programs is going to come from. But it’s just as important to ask where the capacity to operate high-quality pre-k programs will come from once they’re funded. Making high-quality, publicly-funded pre-k available to all 3- and 4-year-olds in a state requires a significant expansion in the number of available pre-k slots, as well as improvements in the quality of existing pre-k programs. Expanding pre-k funding without also expanding building capacity can lead to state funds sitting unused because there aren’t enough providers to claim them, or, worse, to squandering of state investment in poor-

Angeles County First 5 Commission in 2004 to make high-quality, voluntary pre-k available to all Los Angeles 4-year-olds by 2014. Each county in California has a First 5 Commission that uses that county's share of state tobacco tax revenues to make investments in children from birth through age five. LAUP pays for children to attend pre-k programs operated by childcare centers, family home care, and charter schools. The Accelerated School is one of two Los Angeles charter schools participating in LAUP. Camino Nuevo Academy also offers pre-k through LAUP.

### *KIPP McDonogh 15, New Orleans, Louisiana*



KIPP McDonogh 15 is a Pre-K through grade 8 public charter school operated by KIPP New Orleans as part of the Louisiana Department of Education's Recovery School District. KIPP McDonogh 15 opened in August 2006 to serve students returning to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. It currently serves 470 students divided into three grade ranges: The Green School (grades PK-1), The Gold School (grades 2-4), and the Purple School (grades 5-8). (The colors green, gold, and purple are typically associated with Mardi Gras.)

KIPP is a nationally recognized network of high-performing charter schools serving low-income students. While there is significant variation among KIPP campuses, all KIPP schools incorporate 5 "pillars": More

quality programs that do little to advance learning<sup>5</sup>.

To make high-quality pre-k truly accessible for all 3- and 4-year-olds, states must leverage all potential sources of high-quality pre-k capacity, including public school districts, community-based and for-profit preschool providers—and public charter schools. A growing number of high-performing charter schools across the country, including the Accelerated School in Los Angeles; KIPP schools in Houston, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.; and over a dozen District of Columbia charter schools, already offer high-quality pre-k to hundreds of children, using a variety of federal, state, and local funding streams. High-performing charter elementary schools are a promising source of pre-k capacity—if they're allowed to access state funding streams that support pre-k.

Unfortunately, charter schools that want to offer pre-k face barriers to doing so. In New York State, officials have interpreted the state charter school law to exclude charter schools from participating in the state pre-kindergarten program. As a result, high-quality New York charter schools must wait until kindergarten to serve children—even as poor-quality district schools are allowed to offer pre-k. In other states, pre-k funds flow to school districts, but not to charter schools, so charter schools have access to pre-k funds only if school districts agree to include charters in pre-k funding. Many states provide only part of the cost of pre-k programs, and expect school districts to pay the rest out of local property taxes<sup>6</sup>—but charter schools can't raise funds from local property taxes, making it difficult for them to participate in these programs. Since charter schools in most states get less funding per pupil than other public schools do, it's much more difficult for them to cross-subsidize pre-k with per-pupil funds they receive for older students<sup>7</sup>.

States that exclude charters from pre-k miss an opportunity to leverage federal and philanthropic resources for pre-k expansion. State pre-k programs often have only limited funding to help school districts and community providers with the costs of start-up, expansion planning, or facilities upgrades needed to launch or expand pre-k programs. Charter schools, however, have access to both start up and expansion capital, through the federal charter schools program as well as philanthropic sources. If states make charter schools

5. Elizabeth Green, "Red Tape Leaves Tots without Pre-kindergarten Schools," *New York Sun* (December 21, 2007) <http://www.nysun.com/article/68450?access=100728>; David Kirp, *The Sandbox Investment* (Harvard University Press: 2007) <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/KIRDOE.html>

6. W. Steven Barnett, Jason T. Hustedt, Laura E. Hawkinson, and Kenneth B. Robin, *The State of Preschool 2006*, National Institute for Early Education Research. (2006) <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf#page=76>

7. Chester E. Finn, Jr., Bryan C. Hassel, and Sherree Speakman, "Charter School Funding: Inequity's Next Frontier," *Thomas B. Fordham Foundation*, (2005) <http://www.edexcellence.net/institute/charterfinance/>



Time, Focus on Results, Power to Lead, High Expectations, and Parent Choice and Commitment. KIPP McDonogh 15 incorporates these pillars with a creative arts education focus. KIPP McDonogh 15 receives pre-k funding from Louisiana's LA4 State Pre-k program. LA4 uses state-generated funds and federal TANF funding—about \$5,531 per child enrolled in 2006—to cover the costs of up to 6 hours a day of pre-k and 4 hours of wrap-around care for low-income 4-year-olds. The program supports pre-k in either school district or charter public school settings, and served over 9,600 students in 2006<sup>1</sup>.

Although the original KIPP model served students in grades 5-8, and most KIPP schools are 5-8 middle schools, the KIPP organization is increasingly focusing attention on serving elementary school students, including pre-kindergarteners. Nationally, four KIPP schools, including KIPP SHINE Prep and KIPP DREAM Prep in Houston and KIPP LEAP Academy in Washington, D.C., as well as KIPP McDonogh 15, offer pre-k programs.

### *AppleTree Early Learning Public Charter School, Washington, D.C.*

AppleTree Early Learning Public Charter School serves 136 Washington, D.C. 3- and 4-year-old students across three campuses. AppleTree opened as a charter school in 2005, serving 36



1. W. Steven Barnett, Jason T. Hustedt, Laura E. Hawkinson, and Kenneth B. Robin, *The State of Preschool 2006*, National Institute for Early Education Research. (2006) <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf#page=76>

central to their pre-k expansion efforts, they can tap these federal and philanthropic resources to support pre-k expansion.

More fundamentally, the charter school movement has invested significant intellectual and financial resources into thinking about how to scale effective programs, and has developed a core of “education entrepreneurs” committed to delivering quality education at scale. By opening the pre-k sector to charter operators, state policymakers can leverage the same entrepreneurial energy that has driven charter expansion to provide more quality preschool opportunities for needy youngsters—and potentially even infect high-quality school district and community-based pre-k providers with a similar entrepreneurial mindset<sup>8</sup>.

### *Public Education, Meet Diverse Providers*

Charter schooling also offers a useful model for how policymakers can effectively integrate diverse providers into a single, coherent system of publicly funded pre-k education. Neither pre-k advocates nor policymakers want the new pre-k systems that states are developing to rely solely on public school districts to deliver pre-k programs. For starters, school districts lack the capacity to serve all 3- and 4-year-olds. The existing network of what are known as community-based providers—non-profit, faith-based, and for-profit child care and nursery schools that already serve many 3- and 4-year-olds—are a vital source of pre-k capacity. Including community-based providers in state pre-k systems also offers parents a meaningful choice among diverse providers. As a result, most state pre-k programs make some provision for community-based providers, as well as school districts, to offer pre-k.

Unfortunately, not all states have done this well. Some states essentially have two-tiered systems, in which community-based providers meet one set of standards and public school pre-k programs another<sup>9</sup>. In Florida, for example, many of the community-based providers participating in the state pre-k system are of very poor quality<sup>10</sup>. Elsewhere, community-based providers have had difficulty getting

8. Sara Mead, “Old Policies, New Ways to Fund Preschool,” *Education Sector*. (April 2006) [http://www.educationsector.org/analysis/analysis\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=365162](http://www.educationsector.org/analysis/analysis_show.htm?doc_id=365162)

9. Rachel Shumacher, Danielle Exen, Katherine Hart, and Joan Lombardi, “All Together Now: State Experiences in Using Community-Based Child Care to Provide Pre-Kindergarten,” *Center for Law and Social Policy* (February, 2005). [http://www.clasp.org/publications/all\\_together\\_now.pdf](http://www.clasp.org/publications/all_together_now.pdf); W. Steven Barnett, Jason T. Hustedt, Laura E. Hawkinson, and Kenneth B. Robin, *The State of Preschool 2006*, National Institute for Early Education Research. (2006) <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf#page=76>

10. David Kirp, *The Sandbox Investment* (Harvard University Press: 2007) <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/KIRDOE.html>

students on a single campus. Its long-term goal is to serve 500 students across the city, providing them with the social, emotional and cognitive foundations that will enable them to succeed in school. AppleTree uses the *Opening the World of Learning* curriculum, an early language and literacy development curriculum that embeds literacy learning in a comprehensive pre-k program<sup>2</sup>.

Nearly 30 Washington, D.C. public charter schools offer pre-k programs. This is possible because the District of Columbia's uniform per-student funding formula, which funds charter schools based on their enrollment, provides funding to schools to educate 3- and 4-year-old children. The District of Columbia is the only jurisdiction in the country to provide charter schools with per-pupil funding for 3-year-olds, and one of only a couple to provide charters per-pupil funding for 4-year-olds. Most D.C. charter schools that offer pre-k do so as part of an elementary or K-12 program, but a few, like AppleTree, focus exclusively on 3- and 4-year-olds.

AppleTree supplements the per-pupil funding it receives with a grant from the federal Early Reading First program, which supports professional development and assessment costs. The Reading First funding also enables AppleTree staff to work with other Washington, D.C. pre-k programs to help them improve the quality of early literacy and language instruction they offer.

school districts to include them in pre-k programs. Many community-based providers fear that school districts will monopolize new public pre-k funds, ultimately driving community providers out of the market. That fear can be a major source of political opposition for universal pre-k efforts, as in California, where community-based providers played a role in defeating a statewide universal pre-k initiative. As more states seek to create or expand public pre-k programs, questions about how to integrate community-providers into new or growing public pre-k systems will become increasingly important.

Policymakers often approach these questions as “how can we ensure community-based providers have access to the pre-k program?” But that’s not really the right way to look at them. Policymakers who invest in state pre-k initiatives aren’t just funding a new program—they’re building new systems of public education for young children, so the operative question should be, “how should we integrate diverse providers into a high-performing new public education system for 3- and 4-year-olds?” Charter schooling is already doing that at the K-12 level.

Charter schools are the original community-based providers in public education. Chartering provides a way for a variety of entities other than school districts—community-based organizations, non-profit groups, and, in a few states, even for-profits—to gain authority to operate a public school. The school’s charter allows it to receive public funding to educate students and to be held publicly accountable for how well those students learn. As policymakers seek to build new systems of public education for 3- and 4-year-olds that include community-based providers, chartering offers a model for integrating these diverse providers into the public system.

A charter model for pre-k would operate largely as it now does at the K-12 level. Community-based providers seeking to offer publicly funded pre-k would apply to an authorizer for a pre-k charter. Authorizers are entities—typically school districts, universities, state education agencies or other public agencies—that have authority under state law to grade charters. Pre-k charter school authorizers would screen applicants to ensure they are capable of delivering a high-quality education, and would grant successful applicants a charter, which would allow them to operate public pre-k programs, and to receive public funding for pre-k. Authorizers would also conduct ongoing oversight to ensure providers were delivering a high-quality education, using public funds responsibly, and obeying applicable laws. Providers that failed to meet these standards could lose their charters.

Chartering would also enable states to fund pre-k programs efficiently through their state school finance system. Making pre-k

2. Disclosure: Sara Mead serves on the Board of Trustees of the AppleTree Early Learning Public Charter School.

## Schools that are kept from expanding to Pre-K

### *Harlem Success Academy*

Harlem Success Academy currently serves 280 students in grades K-2. Founded in 2006 by former New York City Councilmember Eva Moskowitz, Harlem Success is founded on a simple premise: Every child can succeed. This assertion is borne out in its results—96 percent of Harlem Success' first graders read at grade level, and almost two-thirds read at a second grade level. Harlem Success is making substantial strides in narrowing the achievement gap—but it could do even more if New York allowed it to begin working with children even earlier, in pre-k.



### *Harlem Children's Zone Promise Academy*

Promise Academy, opened in 2004, educates more than 500 students on two elementary school campuses and one middle school campus. The school's campuses currently serve children in grades K-2 and 6-8, but will eventually expand to serve all of grades K-12. Elementary school students at Promise Academy's



a part of the K-12 funding system, rather than a separate pot of money, sends a clear message that pre-k is education—not just child-care. This approach can help insulate pre-k programs from funding cuts in economic downturns, and, over the long run, may help reduce the disparities in per-pupil funding between pre-k programs, which often receive much less funding per-pupil, and K-12. Some pre-k supporters have reservations about using state school finance systems to fund pre-k, however, because it routes funding through public school systems and may make it more difficult to integrate community-based providers into state pre-k. A charter approach, particularly when combined with a strong statewide authorizer, circumvents this problem by allowing community-based providers to become eligible for funding through the state school finance formula<sup>11</sup>.

### *Authorizing and Accountability*

Authorizers are another important reason policymakers and pre-k advocates should consider charter-like models for pre-k programs. The best charter school authorizers have developed nuanced accountability approaches that could potentially help solve some of the significant challenges of early education accountability. Accountability is critical for early education programs. Policymakers and taxpayers, who invest millions of dollars in pre-k programs, want evidence of results. But states can't simply translate their NCLB-style accountability systems down to the pre-k level. Pencil and paper tests that states use under NCLB are inappropriate for 3- and 4-year-old students. There are appropriate ways to assess young children's learning, and such assessments should be part of any state early childhood accountability and quality improvement system. But because young children must be assessed by adults they know, and early childhood assessment results can be somewhat less reliable than those for older children, accountability for early childhood programs needs to be based on other measures, in addition to these assessments.

Pre-k accountability needs to be more nuanced, incorporating on-site observations, input measures, and a variety of assessment results, and looking beyond literacy and math to students' social, emotional, and physical development. The best charter school authorizers, such as the State University of New York and District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, already use such an approach to evaluate the diverse schools they oversee. The pre-k movement could benefit from copying their approach—or even drafting the best existing charter school authorizers to begin autho-

11. Mead, *op. cit.*



first elementary school campus achieve above district averages, and 80 percent of first-grade students read at grade level by the end of the year.

Promise Academy is operated by the acclaimed Harlem Children's Zone, a non-profit, community-based organization that works to improve the quality of life for children and families in some of New York's most devastated neighborhoods. Promise Academy is a natural outgrowth of this mission to drive meaningful change for underserved communities. HCZ delivers a wide variety of social services to children and families in the communities it serves—including pre-k programs—but despite this track record and the academic performance of Promise Academy's students, HCZ's charter schools are not allowed to begin serving students in pre-kindergarten.

rizing pre-k programs.

To be sure, not all charter school authorizers do a good job. But charter leaders and policymakers are working to improve the quality of authorizing and to increase the number of high quality charter school authorizers. In fact, pre-k chartering could offer a strategy for raising the overall quality of charter school authorizing, because it could offer an additional justification for creating new statewide authorizers—which tend to do a better job than smaller authorizers—to oversee pre-k charter schools.

### *Looking Beyond Pre-K to Early Education Alignment*

Finally, charter schools can help confront an emerging challenge facing pre-k policy—connecting pre-k with early elementary schooling. Pre-k advocates have based their case for increased pre-k spending on research evidence showing that high-quality pre-k programs have positive long-term effects on children's lives. But evidence also suggests that a substantial portion of the academic gains from pre-k programs evaporates by the time children get to third grade—a problem known as fade out. Researchers have linked this problem to poor quality in the elementary schools children attend after pre-k<sup>12</sup>.

In order to sustain the learning gains children make in high-quality pre-k programs, policymakers must ensure that high-quality pre-k is connected to a program of high-quality early elementary instruction, with standards, curriculum, and learning supports aligned from pre-k through the early elementary years<sup>13</sup>.

Charter schools are uniquely situated to deliver such an aligned early learning experience. Unlike typical community-based preschool providers, which transfer children to elementary schools when they reach kindergarten, charter schools can continue to serve children from pre-k through elementary and even secondary school. And, unlike school districts, which often see pre-k as a somewhat alien add-on to their existing elementary school programs, chartering offers a strategy for building entirely new schools that are focused around a vision of education specifically tailored to young children's needs and include pre-k as a core component. This enables charter schools to create new models of high-quality, aligned early education for young children—models that could be replicated in other elementary schools. Charter schooling even offers a potential route for the highest quality community-based pre-k providers to begin

12. Janet Currie and Duncan Thomas, "School Quality and the Longer-Term Effects of Head Start," *Journal of Human Resources*, fall 2000, v35 #4, 755-774. <http://www.econ.columbia.edu/currie/>

13. Kristie Kauerz, "Ladders of Learning," *New America Foundation* (January 2006) [http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/ladders\\_of\\_learning](http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/ladders_of_learning)



## *Child-friendly Recommendations:*

- *Eliminate state policies barring charter schools from offering pre-k*
- *Allow charter schools to receive state per-pupil funds to educate 3- and 4-year-olds*
- *Build charter authorizer capacity and expertise in early education*
- *Allow charter schools to access state and federal pre-k funds*
- *Ensure adequate pre-k funding to support quality*
- *Include pre-k charters in the Federal Charter Schools Program*
- *Eliminate caps on the number of charter schools which could be opened*

expanding their offerings to serve early elementary students, expanding the supply and diversity of high-quality elementary school classrooms.

### *Conclusion*

As public schools operating independently outside the school district system, charter schools are able to combine the benefits of both community- and school-based pre-k providers. They focus on pre-k as education rather than childcare, can deliver a seamless educational experience from pre-k through the early grades, and must employ highly qualified teachers. At the same time, chartering allows an increased diversity of providers to enter the pre-k public education space, supports parental choice among pre-k providers, and offers promising new strategies for improving early childhood accountability and better aligning pre-k with early elementary instruction.

Despite these benefits, charter schools are often overlooked as a potential partner for pre-k programs, and even excluded altogether from offering pre-k. That's a serious mistake—but fortunately it's one that policymakers could easily reverse with a few simple policy changes.

### *Recommendations*

Eliminate state policies that bar charter schools from offering pre-k: Policymakers in all states should ensure that their states' charter school laws explicitly allow charter schools to offer pre-kindergarten programs. Policymakers in New York, where the state charter school law has been interpreted to prevent charter schools from participating in the state pre-k program, should amend the charter school and universal pre-k laws immediately to explicitly allow charter schools to offer pre-k.

Allow charter schools to receive state per-pupil funds to educate 3- and 4-year-olds: One of the easiest strategies for growing the number of pre-k providers in a state would be to simply allow charter schools to receive state per-pupil funds to educate 4-year-olds (and, ideally, 3-year-olds), in the same way they now do for older students. This approach, which requires almost no new bureaucracy, has led to substantial expansions in the number of high-quality pre-k slots in Washington, D.C.

Allow charter schools equitable access to state and federal pre-k funds: It's not enough simply to allow charter schools to offer pre-



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k—they also need access to state and federal funding streams for pre-k. State policymakers must ensure that charter schools have the same access to public pre-k funds as school districts (for charter schools that are LEAs) or other non-profit organizations (for non-LEA charters). At the federal level, the Secretary of Education should work with the Secretary of Health and Human Services to eliminate barriers that charter schools face in accessing federal funding streams for early education—such as Head Start and childcare funds—and to provide charter schools with support and guidance in navigating multiple early childhood education funding streams.

Ensure state pre-k programs provide adequate funding to support quality: Charters in many states are able to access pre-k funding—but the funding these states' pre-k programs provide is insufficient to cover the costs of high-quality pre-k. Because charter schools cannot raise funds from local tax revenues, and often receive less per-pupil funding than school districts, they are usually unable to supplement state pre-k funding in the way school districts in these states do. Ensuring state pre-k programs provide adequate per-pupil funding to deliver a high-quality pre-k program would improve overall pre-k quality and allow more charter schools to offer pre-k.

Include pre-k charters in the Federal Charter Schools Program: The federal government invests more than \$200 million annually in the federal charter schools program, which provides start-up funding for charter schools. The No Child Left Behind Act currently defines a charter school as a school that “provides a program of elementary or secondary education, or both,” leaving state officials confused about whether pre-k charter schools, or multi-grade charter schools that start out with a single cohort of pre-k students, are eligible for federal start up funding. Congress should amend the definition of charter schools in the federal law to clarify that it includes pre-k charter schools<sup>14</sup>.

Eliminate caps on the numbers of Charter Schools that can be Opened: Charter schools are a promising source of additional pre-k capacity, but too many states have statutory caps on the number of charter schools, which constrain this capacity. Eliminating or raising charter caps would enable charter schools a powerful force in expanding states' capacity for high-quality pre-k. If this is not politically feasible, state policymakers should consider offering cap waivers for charter elementary schools that offer high-quality pre-k, so that charters can help states expand pre-k capacity without reducing space available under the cap for charters serving older students.

Build authorizer capacity in early education: Charter school autho-

14. Kristie Kauerz, “Ladders of Learning,” *New America Foundation* (January 2006) [http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/ladders\\_of\\_learning](http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/ladders_of_learning)

## Democrats for Education Reform's Statement of Principles

*A first-rate system of public education is the cornerstone of a prosperous, free and just society, yet millions of American children today – particularly low-income and children of color – are trapped in persistently failing schools that are part of deeply dysfunctional school systems. These systems, once viewed romantically as avenues of opportunity for all, have become captive to powerful, entrenched interests that too often put the demands of adults before the educational needs of children. This perverse hierarchy of priorities is political, and thus requires a political response.*

*Both political parties have failed to address the tragic decline of our system of public education, but it is the Democratic Party – our party – which must question how we allowed ourselves to drift so far from our mission. Fighting on behalf of our nation's most vulnerable individuals is what our party is supposed to stand for.*

*Democrats for Education Reform aims to return the Democratic Party to its rightful place as a champion of children, first and foremost, in America's public education systems.*

*We support leaders in our party who have the courage to challenge a failing status quo and who believe that the severity of our nation's educational crisis demands that we tackle this problem using every possible tool at our disposal.*

*We believe that reforming broken public school systems cannot be accomplished by tinkering at the margins, but rather through bold and revolutionary leadership. This requires opening up the traditional top-down monopoly of most school systems and empowering all parents to access great schools for their children.*

*We know that decisive action today will benefit our children, our party and ultimately our nation.*

rizing is a promising model for ensuring quality across diverse pre-k providers—but only if authorizers are high-quality and have expertise in pre-k. State policymakers should implement policies that improve charter authorizer quality and increase the number of high-quality authorizers. Policies that give authorizers increased responsibility to charter pre-k providers must be accompanied by additional resources to expand authorizers' capacity to oversee pre-k providers.

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