

Multiple pathways to expanding school choice



Butch Trusty

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Many education and philanthropic leaders in America's cities understand the interdependencies between schools, talent, policy, and community engagement in transforming local education systems to meet the needs of more students and families. But few leaders have thought deeply about the true potential of focusing on multiple pathways for high-quality school-seat creation as a strategic approach to accelerating the growth and improvement of great public schools.

With great respect for the challenge and complexity involved in systems-level change, we at Education Cities have observed that, historically, leaders across the country have missed opportunities to reach their goals faster and more sustainably by not pursuing a variety of seat-creation paths.

To name this common problem and to hopefully encourage leaders to widen their view of what is possible, we wrote [*Pathways to Success: Providing More Children Access to Great Public Schools*](#). In addition to describing six seat creation pathways we believe have the most likelihood for success, we also touched on the relative advantages and disadvantages of each, and made the case for the benefits associated with not emphasizing any one pathway too heavily.

The abridged version of the paper is straightforward. The basic pathways pursued by most cities include:

- **Replication:** Existing high-quality district schools and charter school networks in the city open new campuses
- **Recruitment:** Existing high-quality charter school networks currently operating in other cities are recruited to open new campuses in the quarterback's city
- **Incubation:** New schools are launched by high-potential leaders

Yet there are three additional pathways that leaders will need to address for most cities to enjoy the advantages of pursuing multiple pathways:

- **Scaling:** Existing high-quality schools add more seats or grades
- **Turnarounds:** Struggling schools are restarted under a new operator or a proven leadership team
- **Enrollment maximization:** Intentional strategies to ensure that families enroll their child in the highest quality options available

Moreover, two big ideas underpin the rationale for seat growth as a theory of change. The first is that investing in scaling existing high-quality schools (i.e., growing more of what works) and facilitating more choices between them, should be our main thrust for transforming struggling education systems. In a world of constrained resources and growing impatience for results, it just makes sense to funnel more resources to schools and programs with proven track records of success than to double down on underperformers and hope for change or to rely on faith that "new" will equal better.

For example, in the language of seat-creation pathways, adding grades (scaling) or additional campuses to an existing district-operated or charter school (replication) should be at least as important as opening a brand-new school (incubation) or recruiting a charter network from out-of-state (recruitment). While the latter two pathways can be successful, they are likely too risky to be relied on as the only strategies used in a city.

The second idea is closely related; it deals more head-on with the tensions about how best to direct public resources. We believe that local education quarterbacks (like members of Education Cities) are strongest when they use a non-profit, venture philanthropy model. This model enables them to leverage a relatively small one-time philanthropic investment to pursue seat-creation pathways that result in better public schools in perpetuity. Essentially, as families enroll their children in higher performing schools, especially in cities where per-pupil resources closely “follow the child,” resources naturally flow to the public schools best serving the needs of students, and away from the ones that are not.

There is no “right” answer, but six or more pathways is likely what most cities will need to create enough high-quality options for all the families that need them.

This work is still emerging, so what’s most important is continuing to capture any lessons on improving the effectiveness of every seat-creation pathway, including the ones we don’t know about yet. The goal is year-over-year increases in the number of high-quality school seats, and opportunities for more students and families to choose among many great options.

Butch Trusty is the managing partner at Education Cities.