



DC Public Charter School Board

Mergers & Acquisition Policy

May 2025

Bellwether engaged 16 charter LEA leaders to solicit input on a mergers and acquisitions policy

16 charter LEAs joined focus groups

Participating LEAs represent:

- Charter LEAs in every ward of the city
- Charter LEAs serving early childhood, K-12, and adult education
- Single site charter LEAs and multi-campus charter LEAs of varying sizes
- LEAs serving <500 students and those serving several thousand students

AppleTree	Lee Montessori
Center City	Maya Angelou
Cesar Chavez	Meridian
DC Prep	Paul
DC Scholars	Rocketship
Friendship	Sela
Ingenuity Prep	Thurgood Marshall
KIPP DC	Washington Leadership

Charter LEA perspectives

- **Mergers are less familiar.** They can improve economies of scale but are complicated and create redundancies in leadership and staff
- **Acquisitions have potential** to address enrollment challenges, access facilities, expand program offerings, and improve resources and benefits for staff
- Acquisitions are currently a **"last ditch effort"** to save a school that is at risk of losing its charter
- Acquisitions are risky, requiring **external support** for schools, and only **large LEAs** are positioned for them
- Single-site charter schools are struggling without scale but are essential for **retaining diverse options**
- Acquisitions make the **sector appear unstable**, especially w/o clarity and messaging from the PCSB
- LEAs who have considered acquisitions are concerned about absorbing **large debts**
- **Clear, phased processes** are needed, that establish distinct pathways and **aren't too burdensome**
- PCSB should **establish indicators** considered for approval and use **existing data** where possible
- A merger or acquisition should include **short-term adjustments** to accountability / financial monitoring

Bellwether engaged 14 sector leaders to solicit input on a mergers and acquisitions policy

14 sector leaders participated in interviews

Name	Organization
Allison Fansler	Equitable Facilities Fund, formerly KIPP DC
Ariel Johnson	DC Charter Alliance
Cat Peretti	CityTutor DC, formerly My School DC
Chyanne Eyde	District of Columbia Public Schools
Jenn Comey	DC Office of the Deputy Mayor
Laura Maestas	DC Prep
Marisa Goldstein	DC Office of the Deputy Mayor
Megan Do	My School DC
Michelle Yan	CityTutor DC, formerly DME
Pat Brantley	Friendship Public Charter Schools
Paul Kihn	DC Office of the Deputy Mayor
Rashida Young	Ed Forward DC
Rebecca Lee	DC Office of the Deputy Mayor
Rick Cruz	NAPCS, formerly DC PCSB board

Sector leader perspectives

- Some think mergers and acquisitions can help address **school challenges** and reduce the disruption **families experience** from closures or lotteries
- Others think acquisitions should be rare; struggling schools should be **closed, not acquired**, or PCSB should facilitate a takeover in limited instances
- Mergers should only happen between two strong schools for purposes of **scale and innovation**
- Mergers and acquisitions are one partial solution to **larger city challenge** of too many schools for declining student population
- Acquisitions have **too short of a runway**; LEAs need to start discussions much earlier and proactively
- Too many mergers and acquisitions could create a **homogenous sector** counter to the sector's mission
- A policy for mergers and acquisitions must be **clear** and grounded in the **needs of students**
- Schools need a **detailed integration plan** and **PCSB should monitor** their progress
- PCSB should **consider indicators** of potential success, including familiarity with DC context, LEA strength, capacity, cultural and program alignment, student demographics, governance, and leadership

Bellwether also interviewed authorizers with experience on mergers, acquisitions, and similar school transitions



Colorado Charter Schools Institute (CSI) does not have a formal policy on mergers and acquisitions, but uses several guiding principles when considering these transitions:

- At least one school must be **high performing**
- Both schools must agree; **"arranged marriages" don't work**
- Schools must engage in sufficient **community engagement**
- Schools must be **geographically proximate** to each other (more relevant in CO context than in DC)
- M&A requires **adequate time for transition**, ideally a year
- A **shared vision, mission, and model** are also critical

Guidance would help...[including] the timeline where you start considering what that we should be doing."

- Terry Croy Lewis



NOLA Public Schools created a District Optimization Policy in 2023 for any actions that maximize the use of facilities, seats, and programs and results in fewer schools by closing and/or combining one or more schools. The policy emphasizes:

- How schools **inform and engage families and the public**
- Student enrollment, including **priority enrollment** options
- Proper allocation of **financial resources** to remaining schools
- A two-year reprieve on school **accountability** after transition
- The approval of **facility assignments** (unique to the district's role as authorizer in NOLA)

"Have an aligned vision of what's the purpose and what's the goal...[and] what your non-negotiables are."

- Anne-Lise McCarver



New York's context for mergers is unique. A 2010 change in state charter law allowed a single entity to manage multiple schools. As a result, a significant number of mergers have taken place to align schools under a single governing entity.

Considerations include:

- **Community** need, outreach, and involvement
- **District** relations and partnerships
- **Curriculum, instruction**, and high-quality **assessment** systems
- **Special populations**
- School **leadership**
- Success for **every student**
- Organizational **capacity** and **fiscal soundness**

"Make [LEAs] write out a plan... they'd rather tweak a plan than write a plan after you [merged or acquired]."

- Carrie Gee

Across focus groups, interviews, and authorizer research, many areas of alignment surfaced

Stakeholders consistently describe **mergers** as a strategic union of two strong LEAs forming an even stronger entity.

- **Rationale:** LEAs might pursue mergers as a solution to leadership transitions, sustainability challenges, low enrollment, or a path for greater efficiency; they can enhance student offerings while integrating the strengths of both entities.
- **Conditions for success:** Aligned models and missions; LEAs that are academically, financially, and operationally strong; sufficient time to plan (usually at least a year); a clear rationale for how a merger can better meet community needs than the existing LEAs could alone; strong leader in place; governing board that is engaged and excited; a clear transition plan; and sufficient engagement of the community.
- **Risks:** Mergers require time, energy, and have financial costs.

Stakeholders describe **acquisitions** as a last resort but see opportunities for more strategic acquisitions in the future.

- **Rationale:** An LEA may seek to be acquired due to academic, operational, or financial challenges; leadership transitions; or for growth, efficiency, and talent development. They can be a tool for improving students' access to high-quality options, minimizing disruption from closures, improve overall sector quality by replacing struggling schools, and create opportunities for successful operators to expand.
- **Conditions for success:** At least one LEA that is academically, financially, and operationally strong; sufficient time to transition (usually at least a year); strong leadership of the acquiring LEA; governing boards that are engaged and excited; a clear transition plan; sufficient engagement of the community; similar student demographics; clear demand from community; manageable debts of the LEA being acquired.
- **Risks:** Acquisitions require time, energy, and have financial costs; they risk diluting the diversity of options; they risk sustaining low-quality schools.

Stakeholders agree that mergers and acquisitions are **rare but strategic tools** to address school and sector challenges, but it is not a silver bullet. Its **effective use requires clarity** on purpose, process, and the roles of LEAs and the PCSB.

Some areas of misalignment or confusion also emerged

- **Some stakeholders are unsure of the breadth of reasons that could compel a merger and acquisition.** They do not always agree on the most important reasons for a merger or acquisition and are also unsure about the PCSB's perspective. A merger and acquisition policy could help clarify whether the PCSB encourages its use, and for what purposes, such as whether a merger or acquisition can be used to support innovation, sustain the size of the sector, support struggling schools, give students a soft place to land if a school is failing, and/or as a solution to lower enrollment trends and projections.
- **The idea of mergers as an avenue to go from “good to great” is compelling to some but is a hard sell for others.** Some stakeholders point out that if two schools are middling, it is unlikely that combining them will lead to better outcomes. Others think that there are clear potential benefits of two less-strong LEAs merging and creating efficiencies that could ultimately improve outcomes.
- **Who should be able to acquire schools is a point of tension.** Some argue that only large charter networks have the capacity and expertise to successfully acquire schools. Others contend that, with the right conditions and support, smaller LEAs could also take on acquisitions and help maintain a diverse set of strong school models.
- **Stakeholders have differing opinions about the level of engagement PCSB should have.** While some emphasize the importance of earlier collaboration with PCSB and post-merger support from the authorizer, others, especially LEA leaders, worry about a burdensome process that inhibits their autonomy.

The draft mergers and acquisitions policy seeks to incorporate input from stakeholders, where possible; leverage research from other authorizers, aligned to the DC context; and to balance and the needs, preferences, and roles of the PCSB board, PCSB staff, LEA leaders, and other stakeholders.