

# How one teacher set a gold standard, and other secrets of top charter schools' success

## Early influences and lightbulb moments

by [Richard Whitmire](#) | August 30, 2016

How did the nation's top charters become so successful and where is this high performing set headed next?

Here are four stories, broken down into two revelations and two takeaways, that help answer this question.

In the first story, or revelation, the overarching theme is the stunning amount of sharing that went on about this elite group (roughly the top 20 percent of all charter schools, the schools that add roughly a year-and-a-half of learning for every year a student spends there).

The revelation is one at which I arrived while I was lunching with Don Shalvey, founder of [Aspire Public Schools](#) and, essentially, the “inventor” of the Charter Management Organization, the nonprofit entities that manage charter schools. The idea behind this my new book, [The Founders](#), came from Shalvey, who now works at the Gates Foundation nurturing charter/district compacts. (The Gates Foundation is a funder of The Hechinger Report).

About to take a sip from his bowl of potato soup at a downtown Washington, D.C., restaurant, Shalvey paused and said, “You know, it didn't have to turn out like this.” Immediately I knew I had heard something important.

Shalvey's observation was both simple and profound. It really *didn't* have to turn out like it did. After all, these high performing charters compete over pretty much everything: students, teachers, foundation funding, and press attention.

How did this intense cooperation come about? Apple doesn't collaborate with Samsung over smartphone design. Princeton doesn't cooperate with Yale over landing top students and professors.

So what was the earliest influence that explains that sharing among these top charters? Or, to put it more succinctly: Was there an original act of sharing that got paid forward?

At first, I didn't consider that an answerable question. Few things in life arise from a single source. Most, social phenomena arise from an intricate and untraceable weave. Why should this sharing defy the law of complexity?

And then I interviewed KIPP co-founder Dave Levin, asking about the earliest influences that shaped KIPP. I decided to risk asking a potentially stupid question and went for it: Was there an original act of sharing?

Of course there was, Levin answered immediately, and her name was Harriet Ball.

Mentioned prominently in Jay Mathews' book, [Work Hard, Be Nice](#), about the early days of KIPP, Ball was the masterful teacher whose classroom in Houston was just around the corner from Levin's classroom. Ball ran her



classroom like a symphony. As a newbie teacher in a challenging school, Levin's classroom sounded more like seventh grade beginning band.

From the book, I knew that Ball taught Levin and KIPP co-founder Mike Feinberg how to be great teachers, lessons that made up much of the early KIPP design. What I didn't know was that Ball passed along her lifetime of teaching mastery with one provision: share.

And share they did, Feinberg in Houston and Levin in New York. There really was an original act of sharing that paid forward, and her name was Harriet Ball. That was my second revelation.

**It really didn't have to turn out like it did.**

And now for the two takeaways (different from revelations because these arise more from hard work than sudden lightbulb moments). The first takeaway I'll call the power of compacts. The second: The power of "necessity" rule. They are somewhat related.

Let's start with the compacts. What these top charters have done is develop schools that can make huge dents in the very large achievement gap between poor, minority students and middle class whites and Asians. At the very least, they are adding a year-and-a-half of learning per year. The very, very best, such as [Brooke](#) charters in Boston, have managed to completely level that gap: The low-income minority kids at Brooke achieve at the same rates as students in the wealthy suburbs outside Boston.

The three Brooke schools serve 1,500 students – with another 4,000 families on wait lists (separate families, not double counted). Although Brooke now has permission to open a high school to take the students from its K-8 schools, there's no expectation of getting a green light to expand beyond that. Brooke alone will not meet the needs of Boston students.

So why not look to compacts, such as [the Denver model](#), where high performing charters such as Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST), get folded directly into Denver Public Schools, using DPS school buildings? DSST is hardly the only top charter group with the capacity to expand.

The obstacles here are not resources or talent. Just political. Which makes the paucity of Denver-style reforms around the country just flat out shameful.

Now the necessity rule. Charter school critics point to the (many) horrendous charter schools out there – schools that should be closed tomorrow. But what really frightens the unions and many superintendents are the high performing charters, schools such as Brooke. Those are the schools that do what they say insist can't be done: give high poverty kids a decent shot at life.

Here's how the necessity rule works, using Newark as an example. Mayor Ras Baraka got elected there in part because of his opposition to charter schools, seen as longtime Newark residents as (white-run) outsiders. Interestingly, many people who voted for Baraka because of that charter opposition actually enroll their children in charters. Why? The necessity rule. The same reason Baraka never tries to go for the charters' jugular. The necessity rule.

Can you really eviscerate charters when the relatively small KIPP charter schools there send [more African American students](#) to college than the Newark traditional schools? Not likely. Again, the necessity rule – the rule likely to save top charter schools even when the anti-charter forces gain ascendancy in cities such as Los Angeles.

So that's it: two revelations, two takeaways. Fresh off the press.

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