
When All Means **All**

Accelerating Districts and Propelling Charters
Toward Citywide Education Reform

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Authors

William Haft
Elizabeth Chu

and

Isabel Amaro
Sarah Brand
Brian Goddard
Derrick Luster
Carly Rettie

About CPRL

The Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University strives to revitalize public education systems while reinventing professional education. CPRL conducts high-impact research and consulting projects for clients in the education sector and provides rigorous coursework, skills training, and real-world experiential learning for its graduate students who attend programs at Columbia University and across the country.

Since its founding in 2011, CPRL has provided research and consulting support to state agencies, school districts, charter school organizations, foundations, and advocacy groups, completing 200 projects. More than two-thirds of CPRL's 550-plus alumni work in education and other public sector leadership and management roles.

Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the insights that more than 80 Houston-area teachers, school leaders, superintendents, independent school district board members, administrators, community members, civic leaders, legislative staff, and parents shared in the more than 50 interviews and focus groups that CPRL conducted.

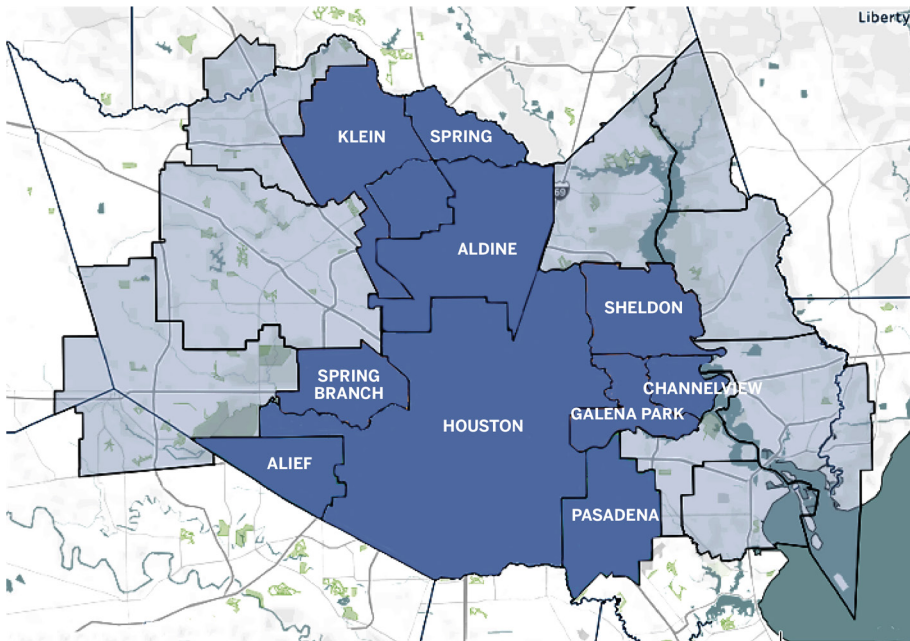
The research team is also grateful for the ongoing advice and support of numerous colleagues who were generous with advice and guidance throughout the process, especially Andrea Clay, Naureen Madhani, and Meghan Snyder.

Introduction

In 2016, in response to persistent public education challenges in the city of Houston, a group of local civic and business leaders coalesced around creating an organization that would, in the words of one of the founding board members, “hold the vision for the community and align people around that vision” for ensuring a quality public education for all students in the city of Houston. The group’s initial focus was early childhood education with the objective of strengthening pre-K enrollment and, by extension, increasing the percentage of third graders reading at grade level. However, notwithstanding

early success increasing pre-K enrollment, the group broadened its scope to fulfill a long-term objective for postsecondary readiness: seeing high school graduates better prepared to compete in and contribute to Houston’s growing economy. The group launched Good Reason Houston in 2018 with an objective of increasing the number of students in A- and B-rated PK–12 schools by 25% (60,000 students) by 2025. Good Reason Houston is a 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization whose mission is to ensure that all city of Houston students have access to quality public education options.

Figure 1: Map of Good Reason Houston Geographic Focus Area



Good Reason Houston's geographic focus includes ISDs and charter districts that have a greater than 50% Economically Disadvantaged student population and that have at least one campus within Houston city limits. Good Reason Houston extends support to other districts in Harris County based on specific support requests that correspond with projects in Good Reason Houston's primary geographic focus area.

Good Reason Houston operates as a funder, an adviser, and a technical assistance provider. It pursues two distinct objectives, each of which has underlying strategic levers:



Good Reason Houston's 5 Levers

System Acceleration. System acceleration includes grants, direct services, and connections to third-party support for ISDs to strengthen their systems-level work. To date, this work has emphasized pre-K enrollment, district strategic planning, community engagement, and teacher pipelines, among other things.

School Transformation. School transformation includes grants, direct services, and connections to third-party supports to dramatically improve the quality of low-performing schools. To date, this work has included district-wide curriculum selection and implementation; Accelerating Campus Excellence (ACE) school turnaround implementation; and charter school instructional training and support.

New School Creation. New school creation includes grants, leadership training, planning support, and project management to create new charter school and district choice options. To date, this work

has included supporting the development of new charter school leaders, funding the expansion of mature networks, supporting the growth of promising small charter sites, and providing planning and project management support for the establishment of new district choice schools.

Community Empowerment. Community empowerment includes direct community engagement work and funding for the work of local community organizations. To date it has included funding for community organizations to do parent advocacy training; conducting surveys, focus groups, and listening sessions as part of district strategic planning; and analyzing community engagement data to inform district priorities.

Policy and Advocacy. Policy and advocacy includes communicating values and beliefs about educational priorities to inform policy decisions. To date, it has included direct support about education priorities and indirect support for advocacy, especially around school finance, accountability, and pre-K education.

Methodology

To evaluate the impact of Good Reason Houston on public education in the city of Houston, we asked and answered two overarching research questions, each with subquestions:

1. How is Good Reason Houston’s work affecting public education practice in the Houston area?

- To what extent is Good Reason Houston building district capacity to perpetuate school quality and equity?
- What effect, if any, has Good Reason Houston had on the quality of low-performing schools?
- How effectively is Good Reason Houston supporting the opening or expansion of school models that have evidence of success or meet the unique needs of marginalized students?

2. How is Good Reason Houston’s work impacting the Houston area’s public education environment?

- To what extent is Good Reason Houston developing parent and community leadership to organize around school quality?
- What effect, if any, has Good Reason Houston’s work had on state and local education policy?

These research questions align with Good Reason Houston’s strategic goals and theory of action.

The research team first worked to understand Good Reason Houston’s organizational structure and programmatic activities by conducting informational interviews with staff and board members and by reviewing organizational documents. The documents included operational materials, such as the organizational chart and operating plans for particular lines of work. It also included external Good Reason Houston materials, such as grant agreements for grants to partner organizations.

The research progressed from internal understanding to external evaluation. The research team interviewed individuals in leadership or senior administrative positions at partner ISDs, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), charter school networks, and community organizations to understand their respective experiences of working with Good Reason Houston and the impact of that work. The research team also reviewed and evaluated Good Reason Houston–supported work products from partner organizations, including strategic plans for ISDs and training materials from community organizations.

The study considered outcomes-based data as available. With respect to school outcomes, the study considered pre–COVID-19 Texas school report card information and incorporated relevant 2022 school and district accountability Information that the Texas Education Agency released just prior to publication of the report.

Impact

Since its founding, Good Reason Houston has worked effectively with both charter schools and traditional school systems by applying a consistent set of organizational competencies to a diverse array of supports suited to the particular circumstances and needs of its partner organizations. Good Reason Houston has had a number of significant successes to date. It has accelerated district work through pre-K enrollment and strategic planning, among other things; helped transform outcomes at two ACE schools and launch three more scheduled to open in August 2022; supported creation of nearly 10,000 seats at district and charter schools of choice; fostered effective parent engagement; and had a meaningful impact on state policy in alignment with its organizational priorities. Good Reason Houston has achieved meaningful impact within each of its strategic priorities.

System Acceleration

Good Reason Houston has meaningfully supported

- strong pre-K enrollment growth in Aldine, Houston, and other partner ISDs.
- development of district strategic plans for the Houston area's three largest ISDs that
 - i. are based on an understanding of school performance;
 - ii. are informed by community input and priorities;
 - iii. have an equity lens; and
 - iv. maintain a strong student outcomes focus.
- research-based selection of curricula and support for districtwide implementation.

School Transformation

Good Reason Houston has facilitated successful implementation of the ACE turnaround model at two chronically underperforming elementary schools that are both B-rated schools as of August 2022.

New School Creation

Good Reason Houston has meaningfully supported development of nearly 10,000 new school seats through grants and other technical assistance for charter school expansion or creation of new charter schools and district schools of choice.

Community Empowerment

Good Reason Houston has been instrumental in

- funding two successful pilots to educate, empower, and engage parents to advocate on behalf of their children.
- incorporating community engagement into district planning processes and making family engagement a district priority.

Policy & Advocacy

Good Reason Houston has been a reliable and trusted voice for

- outcomes-based accountability and access to early childhood education, helping to maintain them as legislative priorities.
- mobilizing community voices and action around education policy priorities.

"Not enough organizations have taken that multiple-pathways approach. I think Good Reason is unique in really, from the jump... building something that is adaptive and meets the needs of the city."

- Rajeev Bajaj, CEO, Kitamba

Keys to Success

Good Reason Houston has been able to accomplish meaningful impact in the charter sector, with ISDs, and in the policy arena because it has gained the status of a trusted partner to district leaders, policy makers, community organizations, and schools. It has developed trust by consistently exhibiting these organizational qualities:

Outcomes oriented

Good Reason Houston's consistent emphasis on outcomes rather than activities was evident across multiple strands of their work including strategic planning, system acceleration, new school creation, and policy. One founding board member noted that at Good Reason Houston's predecessor organization, "we focused on activities instead of outcomes," whereas Good Reason Houston has determined that "the first thing you need to do is make sure you have good schools for everybody." Twenty-five percent of stakeholder interviewees spontaneously referenced Good Reason Houston's strength in holding themselves and others accountable for outcomes. One policymaker characterized them as a "thought leader" in this area. Charter school operators recognize that if they receive funding and support from Good Reason Houston, it is because they are "mission aligned to what Good Reason Houston is working on, in terms of improving Houston education outcomes." Another stakeholder credited Good Reason Houston's policy work during a legislative session, saying that it "really did step up and lead around accountability [for educational outcomes]." One district leader summed it up, calling Good Reason Houston "our accountability partner" for ensuring that the district stays focused on results.

Boots on the ground

School systems, in particular, value Good Reason Houston's readiness to work side by side with district staff to accomplish the task at hand. Substantive strengths that districts identified include data analysis and project management. A recurring theme across the district capacity and school improvement conversations was the ability of Good Reason Houston's staff to engage directly and constructively in the work. Fourteen of 17 district administrators interviewed—including superintendents for all five of the ISDs researched—referred positively to the strength of Good Reason Houston's hands-on support. One recently hired administrator reported that without Good Reason Houston's support, "I would be on an island by myself." The superintendent of a different district described how Good Reason Houston had been able to do the "heavy lifting" for the strategic planning process. Another noted, "they truly will say, 'what can I get off your plate?'" Good Reason Houston's readiness and capacity to do the work has contributed significantly to their successes.

"What I've loved about Good Reason Houston is that they've removed barriers, or anything that's been an obstacle."

- Dr. LaTonya Goffney
Superintendent, Aldine ISD

Quality connector

Stakeholders frequently cited Good Reason Houston's strength in vetting and connecting partners to high-quality third-party support. The Accelerating Campus Excellence (ACE) turnarounds in Aldine ISD have benefited from effective technical assistance around instructional leadership, instructional practices, and social and emotional learning. More broadly, stakeholders frequently cited Good Reason Houston's strength in vetting and connecting partners to high-quality third-party support. For example, one charter school leader stated that without the governing board technical assistance provider that Good Reason Houston recommended and funded, "we wouldn't have been able to open our kindergarten and first grade in the fall ... I don't think our board would have even approved it without [that] help." On the district side, in addition to Aldine, Good Reason Houston has connected other ISDs with a range of third-party supports for financial management, human capital, and special education. One senior HISD administrator noted that HISD "wouldn't have known about or had access to" the same level of experience and expertise without Good Reason Houston's guidance. Another senior HISD administrator emphasized Good Reason Houston's importance as "a sourcer of talent."

"What I see when I look at Good Reason Houston is an organization that is able to take a bird's eye view, look across the landscape, see where the work is happening ... and then make those connections between and among organizations that are doing either similar or complementary work to have a stronger, greater collective impact for the communities that they are serving."

- Armando Orduña
Managing Director, Latinos for Education

Client centered

Good Reason Houston's partners frequently cite Good Reason Houston's client-centered approach as a funder and a technical assistance provider. One charter operator described the organization as "extraordinarily flexible" and remarked that "they feel like funders and partners at the same time." Eighty percent of ISD superintendents interviewed remarked on this quality as well. A superintendent whose

district received Good Reason Houston support for the transition to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic said that Good Reason Houston staff are "very intentional about reaching out, without a solution; they're just asking, what is it that I need? And I'm very grateful for that attitude." District leaders and administrators shared how the Good Reason Houston staff "care about us achieving our goals" rather than coming with a preset agenda. Said one senior administrator, "I'm proud to put Good Reason Houston's name, as well, next to Aldine's, because they are a true partner in the work."

"The people that you're working with [at Good Reason Houston] come with a lot of research and a lot of knowledge. They're really smart, brilliant people but also with the experience of having been in education, having walked in those shoes that teachers are walking in right now."

- Dr. Lupita Hinojosa
Superintendent, Spring ISD

Reliable

Stakeholders say they can count on Good Reason Houston for quality advice and support when they need it. One policymaker has Good Reason Houston in her "circle of trust" because it is reliable in its focus on what is best for children and in its readiness to respond to a need. Good Reason Houston was able to "instantly" galvanize parents and families to engage when the legislature was considering diluting expectations for student learning. Several district leaders expressed confidence in Good Reason Houston's reliability to be "our accountability partners to keep us moving [from week to week]." One leader noted that Good Reason Houston played this role particularly effectively to help further work on strategic priorities even as the district was in crisis response mode during the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all expressed a high degree of satisfaction with third parties that Good Reason Houston had recommended.

"Their expertise is coming with love; it's coming with courage, and it's coming to help us rethink how we can do school better for our students."

- Adrian Bustillos
Chief Transformation Officer, Aldine ISD

Working Effectively with Both Traditional School Systems and Charter Schools

In its four years of operation, Good Reason Houston has worked with 10 city of Houston ISDs and 13 charter schools or charter school systems which together serve well over 500,000 students. Of Good Reason Houston's partner school systems, 10 have more than half of their students receiving free or reduced lunch; 6 have more than a third of their students enrolled in an English Language Learners program; and all are majority non-white.

Most city-based organizations espouse agnosticism about charter schools versus district schools; they believe in quality public schools regardless of the governance model. In practice, however, most of these organizations have a charter school orientation. They are eager to collaborate with the local school system when opportunities arise, but they anchor their work in development, recruitment, and expansion of quality charter schools. By contrast, in a little over four years, Good Reason Houston has balanced its work between charters and ISDs. It has had substantial engagement with five ISDs and more than a half dozen charter operators, showing uncharacteristic balance between those systems even though tensions between the charter sector and traditional school districts are as deeply rooted in Houston as in any other city that has a robust charter sector.

"[Good Reason Houston] has been a major support – giving us a bird's eye view of what some like-minded organizations, or like-minded school districts, are doing, what's working, what the research says. Those things have been very, very helpful."

– Millard House II, Superintendent, Houston ISD

Districts feel positively about their work with Good Reason Houston despite having views on charter schools that range from indifferent to hostile. One district leader noted that "if we would have known up front [about Good Reason Houston's work with charter schools, it] wouldn't have been the partner that we would have selected."

"What I have come to believe in Good Reason Houston is they look for bright spots where they see great stuff happening – whether that's in charter schools, traditional districts – and they seek to expand that good work by a really rigorous approach to data."

– Mark DiBella, CEO, YES Prep

Another expressed initial hesitancy about support that Good Reason Houston was offering: "Where were some of these nontraditional teaching prep programs coming from? Are they coming from the charter world?" District leaders say that Good Reason Houston is genuine in its desire to "put kids in the best school environment possible, whether they're traditional, public, or charter" but still see its support for charters as a source of "friction" and "conflict" for districts. Another senior administrator portrayed it, perhaps mistakenly, as an either-or situation, saying, "I don't want them to spend time with a charter school. I want them to help us create those same learning experiences that attract some students to a charter." Nevertheless, district leaders are willing to tolerate the charter school work, provided it does not affect them directly. The district leader who had expressed hesitancy about teacher pipeline support was subsequently "very grateful" for how Good Reason Houston engaged with and supported her district in responding to COVID-19, rating that work a 4.5 out of 5. Another stated that her district would "pull out of this [System of Great Schools] partnership" if required to approve even one charter school. But without such a requirement, she would "absolutely" want to continue working with Good Reason Houston because the staff are "amazing."

ISDs are dubious about charter schools, and charter school operators return that view with skepticism about ISD capacity for sustained change or improvement. Charter operators wonder “did [or will] anything actually happen” from Good Reason Houston’s system acceleration work. They want to see Good Reason Houston’s investment of resources align more closely with demonstrated outcomes. Even assuming that district transformation is possible, others suggest that it is just “building castles in the sand” because changes are likely to last only as long as the current superintendents and ISD boards remain, yet, charter operators do not begrudge Good Reason Houston’s support for districts.

They may question it from a strategic and resource allocation perspective, but they don’t doubt the integrity of Good Reason Houston’s efforts with ISDs or its ongoing commitment to charter schools. In fact, because of its positive relationship with a charter operator and an ISD, Good Reason Houston played an intermediary role to help resolve a charter-ISD dispute that had potential to become “highly politicized, highly contentious.” Therefore, Good Reason Houston’s system acceleration work does not appear to have damaged its charter credibility or limited its ability to support charter schools effectively.

Conclusion

Based on our research, Good Reason Houston is making a positive impact on the Houston education landscape. Good Reason Houston has demonstrated a remarkable ability to navigate the charter-ISD divide effectively. It has not attempted to close the charter-district gap, but it has been exceptional in its ability to earn trust and operate effectively on both sides of that divide. Much of its success is attributable to the trusted partner practices that characterize Good Reason Houston’s work. Its orientation to the needs of its partners has given it access to working with charters and ISDs. Its hand-on approach and ability to source talent—from its staff or through connections to others—have produced results for which partners on both sides are appreciative. Throughout, it has prioritized children’s educational interests in a way that all of its partners, regardless of their differences, recognize and respect.



 COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK