Passing Notes:
Learning from Efforts to Share Instructional Practices Across District-Charter Lines

Tricia Maas and Robin Lake

February 2018

Acknowledgments

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families. Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools. CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through philanthropy, federal grants, and contracts.

CRPE Quality Assurance Process

Independent peer review is an integral part of all CRPE research projects. Prior to publication, this document was subjected to a quality assurance process to ensure that: the problem is well formulated; the research approach is well designed and well executed; the data and assumptions are sound; the findings are useful and advance knowledge; the implications and recommendations follow logically from the findings and are explained thoroughly; the documentation is accurate, understandable, cogent, and balanced in tone; the research demonstrates understanding of related previous studies; and the research is relevant, objective, and independent. Peer review was conducted by research or policy professionals who were not members of the project team.

Introduction

It's 8 a.m. on a Saturday morning in January. Students at Brooklyn's Uncommon Charter High School practice for a play in the cafeteria as teachers from district schools in the neighborhood trickle into the gymnasium, where they help themselves to coffee and pastries. About 60 teachers and school administrators from the New York City Department of Education (DOE) schools have gotten up early on this cold, gray morning to collaborate with Uncommon Schools staff in professional development workshops designed to improve teachers' checks for student understanding.

As an increasing number of district and city leaders are taking a "sector-agnostic" approach to public education, district-charter partnerships like this one are on the rise in many cities.[1] At least 23 cities to date—ranging from small towns like Central Falls, Rhode Island, to metropolises like Los Angeles and Chicago—have signed District-Charter Collaboration Compacts, formal agreements between school districts and charter schools that aim to ensure equal access to high-quality schools for all students. In collaboration, district leaders are looking for ways to partner with charter schools to replace low-performing schools or achieve other educational or equity goals. For their part, charter schools are often motivated to partner with school districts to increase their access to district facilities and transportation systems. These partnerships are often transactional, focused on short-term agreements that make both sides better off.

However, in the interest of both disseminating effective approaches and strengthening district-charter relationships, many districts and charter schools are also partnering around the core work of schools: improving teaching and learning. Several such partnerships have attracted substantial attention and funding. For example, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative has invested heavily in Summit Learning through a multimillion dollar effort that aims to give district, charter, and parochial schools across the country access to the personalized instructional approach developed by Summit Public Schools, a California-based charter management organization (CMO). Some cities in Texas house charter and district schools in the same building to intentionally disseminate effective instructional practices. And principal and teacher fellowships, often led by charter management or community-based organizations, have emerged nationwide to develop talent for charter and district schools alike.

In our prior research of cities receiving collaboration-focused grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we found that many efforts to share instructional strategies across district or charter lines are time intensive and have resulted in few measurable outcomes for students.[2] Additionally, we found that sector stereotypes and faction interests can easily foil cooperation efforts—efforts that tend to shift with leadership personalities and commitments. As such, collaboration leaders may make the most progress by focusing on stable, mutual interests.[3]

Some recent well-developed and well-funded efforts to share instructional strategies across district-charter lines present new opportunities to learn about key supports and obstacles to this work, which may lead to improved student outcomes. We set out to assess the national landscape on instructional[4] collaboration to learn:

> **Recent efforts to share instructional strategies across district-charter lines present new opportunities to learn about key supports and obstacles to this work.**

- What collaboration approaches are districts and charter schools taking that directly aim to improve teaching and learning?

- What is motivating these efforts?

- In what ways have these efforts experienced success?

- What are the barriers to success?

- What can accelerate the frequency and success of these efforts?

To answer these questions, we first created an inventory of cross-sector efforts around instructional collaboration and identified three core ways that charter and district schools are working together to improve teaching and learning.[5] They include 1) colocating schools with the hope they will learn from each other, 2) creating residencies and fellowships to train teachers or leaders in a particular approach, and 3) sharing resources and providing facilitated professional development trainings and workshops—by far the most common approach.[6]

We then conducted case studies of three potentially high-impact professional development sharing efforts—the Summit Learning Program in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the Boston Educators Collaborative (BEC) in Boston, and Uncommon Schools' Impact partnership in New York City—to better understand benefits, challenges, and key lessons from leaders in the field. These case studies involved data collection from media reviews, 19 on-site interviews with teachers, administrators, and system leaders, and observations of professional development workshops. The three case studies offer important lessons for other programs or cities interested in encouraging the spread of effective teaching and learning practices across school types.

The case studies demonstrate that there are good reasons for charters and districts to collaborate around instruction. In particular, staff reported improved district-charter relationships at the system level and more willingness among educators to collaborate across sector lines. The Summit Learning Program and Uncommon Impact can also point to some early evidence of improved student engagement and outcomes.

But there are also significant challenges to achieving more widespread impact with these collaborative professional development programs, including:

Getting beyond the early adopters. Most of the initiatives we studied rely on eager teachers and leaders to infuse new instructional practices into their schools and build momentum to carry district-charter partnerships forward. But moving beyond these early adopters while preserving quality may be challenging. Some programs in our study have thought hard about growth, but for others, plans to extend the work beyond early adopters are murky. Without clear plans to scale this work within and between schools, it is likely to remain in isolated corners of schools and districts.

What works as a schoolwide strategy may not work piecemeal. Several of the collaborative professional development programs that we observed strive to disseminate practices that have scaled successfully in charter networks. These networks select principals and teachers who execute a coherent school culture and vision, support instruction with schoolwide data and discipline systems, and engage in ongoing cycles of continuous improvement. Transferring discrete instructional practices to less coherent environments may result in marginal student growth, but is unlikely to produce the same results as the original model.

Weak attention to district-level policy barriers. District schools trying to adopt charter practices encountered significant barriers in district policy, from collective bargaining policies to rigid district grading systems. Distrust and cultural barriers between district and charter schools also presented real challenges to adoption.

Looking forward, it is clear from these examples that neither the political nor academic aspirations of these programs can be realized without a commitment to the work from district and charter leadership. When leaders begin efforts to share instructional practices, we recommend the following:

> **Neither the political nor academic aspirations of these programs can be realized without a commitment to the work from district and charter leadership.**

- **Pay attention to local contexts.** If a program does not respond to local academic improvement needs and attend to local political dynamics, it may create conflict or be seen as disconnected.

- **Be clear on non-negotiables** that will support successful dissemination. If organizations leading collaboration efforts do not insist that schools develop the coherent set of factors that make an approach successful, they risk incoherent implementation and diluted outcomes.

- **Secure commitment from district, charter, and other partner organizations** to help overcome system barriers and support the work as it scales.

How Are Districts and Charters Collaborating Around Instruction?

Across the country, there are dramatically different ways that organizations and schools are trying to share successful practices across district and charter lines. In general, district-charter collaborations employ three strategies for transferring knowledge from one school, school network, or district to another.

1) *Colocate* two schools in one building and encourage the leaders and staff to learn from one another. A good example of this approach is taking place in Spring Branch, Texas, where two successful charter schools run by KIPP and YES Prep work side by side with district-run schools. The district actively facilitates this partnership and shares instructional practices throughout the district.[7] Near Houston, the Aldine School District colocated two schools with YES Prep campuses, and school leaders have worked together to improve once-struggling district school cultures and instructional practices.[8] But in other cities, colocating schools has not been enough to cultivate meaningful professional learning.[9]

2) Cross-sector *residency or fellowship* programs intensively train teachers or principals in a particular school model with the intention that they will employ the model and transfer the knowledge to whatever school they work in next. For example, in a partnership with Hartford Public Schools, Achievement First runs a program in which aspiring principals train for a year in an existing Achievement First school and then begin working as an administrator in a district-run school. Residency programs tend to be small and can be expensive. But in cities like Philadelphia, which has a shortage of high-quality school leaders and tense district-charter relationships, fellowship and residency programs may be a productive way to simultaneously create human capital pipelines and build cross-sector relationships.

3) *Workshops and training programs* that offer more traditional professional development to existing teachers and leaders. These efforts are often, but not always, designed to share a charter school practice with district-run schools. Charter schools have also looked to district schools to learn about specific topics, such as special education or Common Core-aligned instruction.

In our review of 25 different programs in which district and charter schools collaborate around instruction, the majority (14) fall into the last category, which we refer to here as PD—professional development. To better understand the motivations, benefits, and challenges related to PD sharing, we conducted case studies of three distinct PD efforts:

The Summit Learning Program and Chicago Public Schools. Summit Public Schools, a California-based charter management organization, supports district, charter, and parochial schools nationwide in using three core components of the Summit Learning approach: 1) individualized pathways to learn content via Summit's free, digital personalized learning platform and in-platform curriculum, 2) 1:1 mentoring to help students develop self-direction and social-emotional habits, and 3) project-based learning to build students' cross-disciplinary cognitive skills (such as writing, analysis, textual analysis).

Summit Learning is one of many personalized learning approaches that schools and districts have recently begun to adopt; it is particularly popular in the Chicago region where, to date, 13 CPS schools (and an additional 12 non-CPS schools) are using the approach.[10] Along with its participation in the Summit Learning Program, Chicago Public Schools is supportive of personalized learning and has a strong relationship with LEAP Innovations, a partner organization that provides grants, networking opportunities, and professional supports to schools attempting to personalize learning for their students.

Schools interested in partnering with Summit attend a summer training, have regular phone calls and in-person coaching sessions with a Summit mentor—who coaches the schools through implementation challenges—and receive virtual supports built into Summit's platform. Additionally, all Summit Learning schools in a region convene twice yearly for PD with the Summit team.

Summit Public Schools does not operate its own charter schools in most of the regions that it serves through the Summit Learning Program. Because Summit Public Schools does not generally compete with its partner schools for students, political outcomes, such as improving cross-sector relationships, are secondary to academic goals. Participation in the Summit Learning Program is free, but without significant philanthropic support, similar partnerships would likely be expensive. And without strong community ties in the region, such a program would likely be vulnerable to shifting leadership priorities and budget cuts.

Uncommon Schools' Impact Partnership with the New York City Department of Education. Uncommon Schools operates charter schools in six regions across three states and is pursuing locally developed partnerships with several of the districts in which its schools are located. For the past three years, Uncommon Schools has collaborated with the New York City Department of Education (DOE) to annually host a series of three or four Saturday PD sessions for DOE teachers and administrators who serve the same communities as Uncommon's schools serves.[11] Uncommon works with the DOE to determine which PD will be most useful to attendees. Uncommon also receives political support for the collaboration through the DOE Chancellor's Equity & Excellence for All initiative, in which developing district-charter partnerships is an explicit priority.

Uncommon Schools has spent years developing PD content to support the network's own teachers and uses that content to provide the New York City DOE professional development. In addition to providing PD, Uncommon hopes to learn from DOE educators, but determining how to locate the best educators in the DOE and learn from their methods has challenged two-way knowledge transfer.

Unlike Summit, which has entered the Chicago community as an outside organization, Uncommon Schools has assumed the role of a teacher and partner in its own community. Uncommon has catalogued effective instructional approaches, created a well-packaged system of PD delivery, and gained the support of district and charter leaders. Uncommon Schools is eager to share its expertise to both expand its impact and build relationships with the broader community. Although organizations taking similar approaches to collaboration may be interested in two-way sharing, they may similarly struggle to find partner schools with PD resources that are well-organized and easy to access. Additionally, careful framing and relationship management is necessary to avoid inadvertently coming across as superior.

Boston Compact. The Boston Compact's mission is to ensure excellent instruction for all students and to provide students across Boston equitable access to high-performing schools—district, charter, or Catholic. The organization, established by leaders of Boston Public Schools, the Boston Charter Alliance, and Catholic schools in Boston, seeks to build a community of high-quality schools with diverse governance models by drawing from the strengths of all three sectors and addressing common challenges.

In the past several years, the Boston Compact has focused its initiatives on various methods of sharing instructional approaches. Most recently, it has partnered with Teach Plus, a national organization with a mission to elevate teacher voice, to host a series of six by-teachers, for-teachers PD courses, with plans to expand the program to 34 courses in the 2017-2018 school year. In this partnership, called the Boston Educators Collaborative (BEC), Teach Plus selects and trains district, charter, and Catholic school teachers who are interested in leading a series of five BEC PD workshops on a topic chosen by a host school. Teachers across Boston who attend the BEC workshops have an option to receive graduate or district PD credits. Notably, this work takes place on the heels of "Question 2," an unsuccessful and politically divisive ballot initiative to raise the charter school cap in Massachusetts.

District, charter, and Catholic school educators participating in BEC play the part of both teacher and student. This approach to collaborative PD, which avoids sector-aligned hierarchical relationships, provides both district and charter educators the opportunity to share their successes and opens lines of communication across sectors by focusing on common work and purpose. Positioning district and charter educators as neighbors sharing high-leverage practices with one another may be a good first step in healing political wounds, but it is difficult to measure the program's impact on students using this approach. As such, the work may be vulnerable to shifting priorities and funding cuts.

The three PD programs we studied differed in several important ways:

> *Comprehensiveness: comprehensive support system versus a la carte workshops.* Some PD efforts aim to impart many aspects of a school—such as instruction, culture, structures—while others take a narrower approach. The Summit Learning Program, for example, offers a comprehensive set of trainings and supports that aim to impart the key elements of Summit Learning as well as share the charter network's tools and curricula. Other efforts, like Uncommon's Impact partnership and BEC, offer more of an "a la carte" model, where teachers and leaders pick and choose from a menu of less comprehensive PD topics. Uncommon Schools provides a series of three sessions, each of which focuses on a specific aspect of instruction (for example, 100 percent student engagement). BEC similarly provides a variety of PD content, but teachers select one topic (such as elementary literacy circles) and attend a series of sessions with that focus, while sessions on other topics run concurrently.

> *Participation requirements: required commitments versus come one, come all.* The programs also vary in the requirements they place on participants. To participate in the Summit Learning Program, schools must meet certain technical requirements (1:1 computers, sufficient bandwidth

and connectivity) and commit generally to use core elements of Summit's approach to learning (1:1 mentoring, project-based learning, and individualized pathways to master content).[12] Conversely, Uncommon Impact and BEC have few participation requirements. The programs encourage participants to attend a series of PD sessions (three and five sessions, respectively), but neither hold participants accountable for attendance or implementation.

Measurement: satisfaction versus outcomes. PD programs vary in their primary goals, and measurement agendas vary accordingly. Leaders across the Summit Learning Program, Uncommon Impact, and BEC regularly use surveys to gather participants' feedback and gauge satisfaction (for example, perceived usefulness, likelihood to recommend the PD to colleagues). Uncommon Schools additionally tracks teacher participation by school and maps these participation rates against school-level growth on standardized tests. And the Summit Learning Program, which takes a much more comprehensive and hands-on approach to instructional change, uses student-level platform data to assess the partnership's academic impact.

Attendees: teachers versus full instructional team. Across PD efforts, teachers are typically the primary audience, but many PD leaders—including Summit and Uncommon Schools—also encourage members of school and district leadership teams to attend so that they can support educators as they implement new practices.

A summary of how our three case study sites vary along these dimensions is shown in table 1.

TABLE 1. In-Service PD Programs Vary by Context and Approach

	Summit Learning Program	Uncommon's Impact District Partnership	Boston Educators Collaborative
Summary	National CMO supporting adoption and adaption of the Summit Learning approach, CMO not competing for students. Program going into its third year, has experienced large expansion each year.	Local CMO to district, PD workshops on instructional topics determined by NYC DOE and Uncommon Schools. Program is in its fourth year.	Teacher-to-teacher trainings on teacher-selected topics. Program is in its first year.
Comprehensiveness	Whole-school model and curriculum.	Series of PD workshops on instructional techniques.	Teachers choose from a menu of PD topics.
Participation requirements	Technical infrastructure requirements, commit to three core elements of Summit Learning.	None.	None.
Measurement	Participant surveys, platform data.	Participant surveys, academic achievement analysis.	Participant surveys.
Attendees	School leadership and grade-level teaching teams.	Teachers, school and district administrators.	Teachers from district, charter, and Catholic schools in Boston.

Benefits and Challenges

The program leaders we spoke with pointed to two core motivations for engaging in cross-sector sharing of instructional practices: improving student outcomes and strengthening cross-sector relationships. Although all initiatives hope to achieve both outcomes, programmatic structures and resource allocation decisions reveal how leaders prioritize these goals. Summit Learning Program's core objective is to achieve measurable student growth, and this priority is reflected in the program's participation requirements, comprehensive approach, and ongoing training. Less comprehensive (and resource intensive) approaches like Uncommon Impact or BEC are likely to improve community relationships before observing instructional shifts or student growth.

Regardless of the programs' structures, their leaders all recognize the importance of working with both district and charter leadership to create an approach that matches the specific academic and political needs of their communities. This leads to a marked diversity of efforts. Still, some benefits and challenges appear across all three programs we studied.

Benefits

Although all of the initiatives we studied were in their early days, leaders told us that participants are enthusiastic about the programs and perceive promising academic and political effects. These benefits include perceived breakdown of sector stereotypes and silos, and improvements in student engagement

PD programs may help to break down sector stereotypes and silos. Longstanding stereotypes and ideological camps can make it challenging to establish productive district-charter relationships, but collaboration leaders are committed to doing so and have seen early progress. BEC participants noted that the program's sector agnosticism provided a breath of fresh air from ugly district-charter politics. Similarly, one New York City DOE leader said that observing and benefiting from charters' contributions can help to deconstruct mental barriers, which may have ripple effects that extend beyond teacher practice. One DOE leader recalled a charter skeptic in the district saying, "I may hate charter schools, but Uncommon sure does a good job of training first-year teachers."

To successfully navigate tense political dynamics, leaders of these programs have worked with both district and charter leaders to design approaches that match specific community needs. In New York City, district leaders recently recognized that many of their teachers were entering the classroom lacking foundational skills, which led to the DOE's recent collaboration with Uncommon Schools to provide training on core instructional practices. But in Rochester and Newark, where Uncommon also partners with the district, the communities' academic needs, political contexts, and corresponding collaborations look different, focusing on pre-service training[13] and the dissemination of Uncommon's successful "Great Habits, Great Readers" literacy program.

In Boston, Compact leaders shifted their collaboration approach over time to increase academic impact and opportunities for cross-sector relationship building. In the past, the Boston Compact has supported school communities composed of one district school, one charter school, and one Catholic school that met regularly to share practices. These triads served as proof points that collaboration could work, but they were limited in scope. Over time, the Compact recognized the need to provide collaboration opportunities to a broader group of teachers in both sectors.

This was particularly true in the wake of Question 2, which both district and charter leaders observed stressed cross-sector relationships. One Boston district leader said that BEC's focus on instruction can help district and charter educators to rise "above the narrative" and the politics that have stressed

cross-sector relationships in Boston. A Boston Compact leader similarly noted that the BEC work may help educators to move beyond ideology. She said that after Question 2, "walls and fences went up . . . so there is this element [to the BEC work] that is just getting people together."

Indeed, Summit, Uncommon, and Boston Compact leaders successfully brought together educators who may otherwise never have crossed paths. We heard from PD participants that these gatherings of educators, focused on similar instructional challenges, have prompted a number of ongoing professional and personal relationships. In the context of often vitriolic politics, it behooves those interested in sector-agnostic approaches to break down misconceptions. These programs all acknowledge that while improved student outcomes are the primary goal, better relationships are an important secondary goal.

> **These programs all acknowledge that while improved student outcomes are the primary goal, better relationships are an important secondary goal.**

At the district level, New York City central office staff reported feeling that, through explicit district-charter partnerships, charter norms are "pervading different teams in the DOE." The district also is now thinking more deeply about how to support charter schools through special education and other services. In Chicago, district employees are in close communication with their schools to respond to challenges translating Summit Learning to a district context. This partnership has led the district to consider offering a number of new flexibilities around grading systems and professional development to encourage innovation.

Participating educators say they see improvements in student engagement. Initiative leaders have little student outcome data to point to thus far, but participants in all three PD partnerships shared examples of improvements in student attitudes and engagement. One administrator in a Chicago public school using Summit Learning noted that students are excited about the new instructional approach, and she credits Summit Learning with recent attendance rate and test score increases. Another Chicago district leader said, "Kids thought traditional [instruction] was okay at the beginning [of the year], but now say that they have more ownership and don't like to be talked at all the time."

Despite its less intensive PD approach, teachers involved in Uncommon's Impact partnership also reported classroom-level impacts. In a New York City DOE-conducted focus group, all five of the participating teachers said that the strategies that they learned in Uncommon Impact PD contributed to improved student engagement in their classrooms, and one teacher in the focus group said that the strategies helped her improve her observation rating from "developing" to "effective." Additionally, Uncommon Schools' data indicate that New York City district schools that sent more than 10 teachers to the Impact program in the 2015-2016 school year (which focused entirely on Common Core-aligned reading instruction) made, on average, more than double the growth in English Language Arts as the rest of their districts.[14]

Summit monitors student progress in partner schools by tracking data from the program's online platform. But leaders of less comprehensive interventions (BEC and Uncommon Impact), acknowledged that the link between a few PD sessions and measurable student outcomes is "just too tenuous." Although BEC, Uncommon Impact, and corresponding district leaders have not been able to assess their work's impact on student achievement, the groups use surveys, focus groups, and personal testimonies to gauge how the PD sessions influence attendees' instructional practice.

Challenges

Summit Learning Program, Uncommon's Impact district partnership, and Boston Compact's BEC have garnered substantial participant enthusiasm, but all the programs are young and challenges that come

with scale wait around the corner.[15] Collaboration leaders are attending to some of these obstacles, but overcoming them will require deep and ongoing strategic work. Failure to give these threats sufficient attention will likely result in limited impact and fleeting support for these initiatives.

Engaging skeptics will be more difficult than engaging early adopters. Although most early-adopter participants have openly engaged with others in cross-sector workshops, teachers we talked with confirmed the presence of powerful stereotypes and deep cross-sector distrust among their colleagues who have chosen not to attend the collaborative trainings. One charter teacher told us that for some charter teachers, "there is this sense of superiority and a sense of 'we do things better,' and there's this perception of [district] teachers that they're not good and they don't work hard." Other charter teachers told us that they have colleagues who generalize district schools as ineffective, while some district teachers reported that they have colleagues who are open about "hating" charter schools because they feel that they cherry-pick students, leaving district schools with the most challenging populations and less funding. Program leaders hope that participants will act as ambassadors to others in their schools, slowly diffusing stereotypes and negativity.

But some preconceived notions are so strong that they will likely be a powerful rival to positive anecdotes. For example, one district principal reported that when she heard that money for teachers to attend a charter-sponsored training would come out of the school's PD budget, she "felt like throwing up in her mouth." The district ultimately decided to cover the cost of the PD from a central budget, but such visceral reactions to cross-sector partnerships can be crippling to the creation of new collaborative communities where diffusion and scale depend on mutual trust.[16]

With eager volunteers shaping the early days of this work, naysayers and resisters have been, to date, largely out of the picture. But as leaders attempt to scale this work, cross-sector distrust is likely to emerge as a key challenge. Collaboration leaders must carefully navigate this sea of skeptics. Focusing collaboration on the common goals of serving students, working together to solve common problems, and tailoring the work to meet joint district and charter needs may develop foundational relationships and cross-sector trust among early participants. But if collaboration leaders hope to have a broader impact, they may consider requiring school- or team-level commitment to the work, as Summit does. Requiring participating school administrators to commit to the work schoolwide may enhance academic impact by giving teachers a community of practice and giving those engaged in the work a stronger voice against would-be saboteurs.

What works as a schoolwide strategy may not work piecemeal. Many cross-sector practice-sharing efforts have been born of the desire to disseminate strategies that have been effectively replicated in charter networks. But transferring practices from effective schools—characterized by supportive cultures and schoolwide structures—to individual classrooms has proven challenging.[17] Comparing recommendations from research on the characteristics of effective schools to the content offered in the three case study sites (see table 2) reveals a disconnect: The PD content we observed focuses on classroom strategies, not schoolwide efforts, even though the initial successes often took place in broadly effective schools. Schools and teachers adopting instructional practices in isolation may struggle to achieve the same outcomes as teachers in schools where those and other supporting practices are used schoolwide.

TABLE 2. Research-Based Effective School Correlates and Professional Development Topics

Effective School Characteristics (mostly schoolwide)	ECase Study PD Topics (mostly classroom-focused)
• Shared sense of purpose/mission, including clear goals focused on student learning	• Literacy circles
• Data use, monitoring of student progress and outcomes	• Culturally responsive classrooms
• Orderly but not oppressive atmosphere	• 100% student engagement
• Orderly but not oppressive atmosphere	• Cold calling
• Collaboration/coordination among staff	• Checks for understanding
• Increased and/or effective use of time	• Learning management system and online content
• Culture of high expectations	• Student mentoring practices

As we heard about educators' attempts to transfer strategies that have been effective at the school level to individual classrooms, the critical role of school-level supports was apparent. One New York City district leader observed, "Many DOE principals don't have data systems in place. Many don't have schoolwide discipline systems. In many ways, this work is about changing the culture of education settings, which is hard to do in one-off classrooms." Without a coherent school-level vision and aligned supports, the academic impact of a few new approaches in individual teachers' classrooms will likely be limited.

Without a coherent school-level vision and aligned supports, the academic impact of a few new approaches in individual teachers' classrooms will likely be limited.

Similarly fragmented approaches to dissemination have fallen short of their promises in the past. For example, in the early 1990s the public and private sectors spent $130 million on the newly formed New American Schools Development Corporation to scale promising school models. But as grantee programs attempted to package the work, the models' coherence splintered and successes faded.[18] As currently structured, today's school-level collaboration approaches risk going down the same path as their predecessors. In an effort to easily disseminate successes, complex school formulas have been oversimplified. Even the Summit Learning Program, which asks schools to adopt a relatively comprehensive approach, has seen schools pick and choose aspects of their program that are easiest to implement.[19] Isolated components of much more complicated flagship organizations may contribute to small change, but it's doubtful that these practices can be as powerful as the original models.

Weak attention to district-level policy barriers can challenge dissemination across district-charter lines. Even when initiatives attempt to disseminate a coherent set of schoolwide practices, broader system conditions—both structural and logistical—can challenge the likelihood that these practices effectively scale.

Some of the most substantial barriers can be traced back to collective bargaining agreements and resultant staffing parameters. Although some principals are excited about improvement and change, district leaders were frustrated by the number of resistant principals who, under principal contracts, have little incentive to improve. Even with an engaged school leader in place, teacher collective bargaining agreements often block principals' autonomy to staff their schools with like-minded educators. Without hiring autonomy, building a staff that shares a common mission, purpose, and goals focused on student learning—a condition that consistently characterizes effective schools—becomes a daunting challenge.[20]

In addition to these staffing hurdles, transferring instructional practices across sector lines also faced logistical hiccups. For example, in Chicago we heard that the competency-based system built into the Summit Learning approach is misaligned with the district's grading system. Summit has found that it can be difficult and time consuming to secure agreements and arrangements with large districts that must grant waivers or make other accommodations to use the model. One Summit Learning Program mentor said that logistics like signing legal contracts and securing student rosters and schedules often takes much longer in district than in charter schools, noting, "You would hope that [these kinds of logistics] were just annoyances, but then they kind of end up being bottlenecks."

Such delays can have huge implications for how teachers and students experience Summit Learning. In Chicago, district delays meant that some students could not get on Summit's instructional platform until five or six weeks into the year, substantially delaying student learning and likely frustrating teachers who had to shift their instructional approach six weeks into the school year.

District organization and structures can also challenge two-way collaboration between charters and districts. Uncommon Schools is eager to learn from district schools—particularly around special education and English language learner practices—but weak knowledge-management systems in the district have made it difficult to locate and disseminate the highest-quality district practices. This problem may block the dissemination of effective approaches, but it also risks frustrating the work's relationship-building goals. Over time, the optics of one-directional knowledge transfer may reinforce negative perceptions of charters as know-it-alls, rather than support healthy cross-sector relationships.

Supportive district policies and structures may help address these challenges. Chicago Public Schools provides the option for school leaders to seize staffing autonomies by becoming "independent" schools, which are district schools that enjoy heightened autonomies around budgeting, purchasing, and professional learning decisions. And its Office of Teaching and Learning is actively working with schools and Summit Learning to iron out grading and scheduling challenges. But in districts with a culture of compliance and no central support for innovative approaches, only the strongest principals tend to think creatively and overcome logistical challenges.[21] Most principals strive to operate within the structural barriers that they believe exist in their districts—many of which, upon close examination, are likely to be easily surmountable or nonexistent.[22] But both real and perceived roadblocks can be equally salient barriers to collaboration across sector lines. One Boston teacher said, "A lot of people feel like they're unable to learn from charters because [charters have their own] structures in place. Charter schools feel that they're unable to [learn] . . . things from district people because they have *their* structures in place." Until district and school leaders address such real and perceived barriers to collaboration, meaningful cross-sector practice sharing is sure to only exist among the most open-minded and nonconformist teachers and principals.

Implications

As more leaders on the front lines of education, government, and philanthropy consider sharing instructional practices across sector lines, a number of early considerations can help make this work successful. To support and expand this work's early successes, leaders should:

- *Pay attention to local contexts.* If a program does not respond to local academic improvement needs and attend to local political dynamics, it may create conflict or be seen as disconnected.

- *Be clear on non-negotiables* that will support successful dissemination. If organizations do not insist that schools develop the coherent set of factors that make an approach successful, they risk incoherent implementation and diluted outcomes.

- *Secure commitment from the district, charter, and other partner organizations* to help overcome system barriers and support the work as it scales.

The work of sharing instructional practices across sector lines is overdue and important. There are many good reasons to engage in this work—disseminating effective instructional practices, breaking down unproductive stereotypes, and challenging systems to accommodate new practices among them. But this is not the first time that education systems have attempted to scale "proven" practices to a broader education arena characterized by a new and diverse set of supports and constraints. Indeed, the implications in this report are well aligned to what we've learned from other research on district-charter collaboration.

There are many good reasons to engage in this work—disseminating effective instructional practices, breaking down unproductive stereotypes, and challenging systems to accommodate new practices among them. When done wrong, these efforts have had little impact and wasted considerable time, money, and energy.

Education leaders hoping to make change through disseminating school-level wins should learn from the early work of the efforts profiled here, as well as similar efforts that have come and gone before. When done wrong, these efforts have had little impact and wasted considerable time, money, and energy.

It is clear that sharing instructional practices across district-charter lines demands levels of political sensitivity that rise above previous dissemination efforts. But leaders also must be careful not to compromise their model so much as to dilute it of its effectiveness. Doing so may compromise both the dissemination efforts and the larger brand of the flagship organization.

Finally, a core challenge to this work is continuing and expanding it in the presence of skeptics and resisters. At the moment, collaboration efforts are successfully engaging early adopters—teachers and principals who are already wired for continuous improvement. Solely engaging natural proponents may achieve some goals: Injecting effective instructional practices into corners of schools and classrooms and opening lines of communication across sectors. But moving beyond early adopters to meaningfully improve students' educational experiences will require district leaders to rethink structures like staffing guidelines and grading and scheduling systems that currently set the rules of the game. CRPE's ongoing research on district-charter cooperation will continue to track and, when available, report on promising instructional collaborations and systems that support them.

Endnotes

1. See our research on cities pursuing the portfolio strategy.

2. Sarah Yatsko, Elizabeth Cooley Nelson, and Robin Lake, *District-Charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2013).

3. Robin Lake et al., *Bridging the District-Charter Divide to Help More Students Succeed* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).

4. We use the term "instruction" to broadly capture initiatives that aim to improve teaching and learning through new approaches to pedagogy, routines and procedures, culture setting, or school leadership.

5. We consider school-level collaboration to pertain to the work of teaching and learning or school leadership. This stands in contrast to other systems-level collaboration efforts that we have seen in the past, like unified enrollment systems, or facilities sharing with the sole purpose of equitably allocating space.

6. To create our inventory, we looked to notes from regular interviews that CRPE researchers have conducted over the last five years with education leaders in cities where district and charter sectors have explicitly agreed to collaborate, including the 23 cities which to date have signed District-Charter Collaboration Compacts—formal agreements between school districts and charter schools with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that aim to ensure equal access to high-quality schools for all students. While there is no doubt initiatives exist outside of these regions, considering the work in these cities provided us with a sample of efforts that help to answer how this work varies by approach and leadership.

7. Read more about this partnership: Libuse Binder, *In-Depth Portfolio Assessment: Spring Branch Independent School District, Texas* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015).

8. Elliott Witney, "When Districts & Charters Partner – the Sky is the Limit," KIPP Blog, March 5, 2015; "District Partnerships," Yes Prep Public Schools (accessed November 30, 2017); Aldine District-Charter Collaboration 2016 City Summary (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).

9. See Michael DeArmond, Elizabeth Cooley Nelson, and Angela Bruns, *The Best of Both Worlds: Can District-Charter Co-Location Be a Win-Win?* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015).

10. "Schools in the Summit Learning Program," Summit Learning website (accessed November 30, 2017).

11. Uncommon Schools has also partnered with the NYC DOE to provide district staff leadership training through the Relay Graduate School of Education's National Principals Academy Fellowship.

12. See the Summit Learning program requirements: "Implement Summit Learning," Summit Learning website (accessed November 30, 2017).

13. Through Uncommon's Summer Teaching Fellows Program, Uncommon Schools provides summer training to rising college seniors of color, then places them in Uncommon and district schools in the Rochester area for their senior year internship.

14. While promising, these data are purely correlational and come from only one year. They should therefore be interpreted with caution.

15. Organizations in this study and beyond have variable ambitions for reaching "scale." Some organizations hope to partner with a large number of schools nationwide, while others hope to have a deep impact in their local community. Challenges outlined in this section likely apply regardless of whether organizations hope to achieve impact through breath, depth, or both.

16. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1995): 25. Other literature has found that unless positive interactions outnumber negative interactions in an organization or relationship by 5 to 1, the negative perspective is likely to prevail. Roy F. Baumeister et al., "Bad is Stronger Than Good," *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 4 (2001): 323-370.

17. Tricia Maas and Robin Lake, "Effective Charter and Traditional School Characteristics: Aligning Findings for Informed Policy Making," *Journal of School Choice* 9, no. 2 (2015): 165-178.

18. David K. Cohen et al., *Improvement by Design: The Promise of Better Schools* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Mark Berends, Susan J. Bodilly, and Sheila Nataraj Kirby, *Facing the Challenges of Whole-School Reform: New American Schools After a Decade* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2002); Paul Hill and Tricia Maas, *The Case for Coherent High Schools* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015).

19. For example, we heard that while most schools using Summit Learning protect time on the online platform, many schools—especially those early in the implementation process—sacrifice mentor time, when teachers are supposed to meet one-on-one with students to check in on progress and coach students in skills like time management and perseverance.

20. Cohen et al. (2013); Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (New York, NY: Russel Sage Foundation, 2002): 137-138. In their book, Bryk and Schneider documented how, following Chicago reforms that offered principals new autonomy in staffing in 1988, principals "aggressively used their newly acquired authority to recruit new staff who wanted to teach in their particular community and serve its children and parents," resulting in new levels of relational trust and school coherence.

21. Lee Sherman and Chris Rhines, "Comprehensive Means Everything: Deep Change Requires a Maverick Principal and a Staff That's Willing to Put All Resources on the Table." *Northwest Education* 5, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 22-27.

22. Larry Miller, *Policy Barriers to School Improvement: What's Real and What's Imagined?* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2014).