

Issue BRIEF

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Seeking Common Ground: Early Lessons in District-Charter School Collaboration

School districts and charter schools in seven cities received grants to help them create district-charter compacts, or public agreements, that represent the schools' shared commitment to improving college readiness for students.

In November 2012, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched an innovative project that brought traditional public schools together with charter schools and charter management organizations—and, in some cases, Catholic schools—to expand access to high quality education. School districts and charter schools in seven cities formed partnerships and received grants to help them (1) collaborate on evidence-based solutions aligned with the Gates Foundation's College Ready strategy and (2) improve the equity of access, resources, and accountability across district and charter schools. The schools, located in Boston, Denver, Hartford (Connecticut), New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, and Spring Branch (Texas), were chosen from several cities that had previously signed district-charter compacts in 2010 and 2011. These compacts, or public agreements, represent the schools' shared commitment to improving college readiness for students, endorsed by district superintendents and charter school leaders and supported by other partners in the cities.

Mathematica has been studying the implementation and outcomes of these collaboration grants since July 2013. In a new report, we examine the grantees' activities from December 2012 through winter 2013–2014, focusing on the direct participants in the collaborations. The main goal of the analysis was to understand whether and how collaboration—and the sharing of effective practices, in particular—was occurring on a small scale. Our findings are based on several types of data: (1) semistructured telephone interviews with 4 to 6 central-office-level administrators in the traditional public and charter school sectors (and Catholic school sectors, when relevant) in each site; (2) in-person and telephone interviews with 4 to 10 leaders of traditional public and charter schools (and Catholic schools, when relevant) in each site; (3) focus groups and telephone interviews with 7 to

16 teachers in traditional public and charter schools in each site; and (4) observations of two or three grant activities in each site.

KEY FINDINGS

Findings from our early implementation analysis were mixed. Several activities implemented in multiple sites show promise in helping to spread effective practices across schools and staff, but overall progress in increasing collaboration has been limited.

Promising practices

Staff at both charter and traditional public schools cited purposeful co-location—two or more schools sharing the same building—and school partnerships as key drivers of collaboration. Respondents at all levels and across all sites

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said that co-location spurred teamwork, particularly when implemented as intentional, purposeful partnerships between two schools (including compact partnerships). In successful co-location partnerships, respondents noted a sense of shared investment in all students in the building, particularly when the schools share services, extracurricular activities, or elective courses. However, in a couple of sites, respondents at all levels noted that co-located schools sometimes increase tension across sectors, particularly when facilities are scarce and co-locations are the result of convenience rather than thoughtful partnerships.

Collaboration between sectors at the central office level set the stage for collaboration at other levels. For some grantees, key city and district leaders created an environment where collaboration was viewed as a priority. Respondents in five of the seven sites noted that the mayor, superintendent, or district office encouraged collaboration and open communication across sectors. At the same time, some administrators were skeptical that even a high degree of cooperation at the central office level could lead to systematic change.

Intensive training and residency programs for school leaders were promising avenues for sharing best practices, as reported by all sites that used these programs. In two sites, grant-funded, intensive residency programs established to develop aspiring leaders were especially influential in helping form cross-sector networks that participants anticipated would be sustained.

Areas for improvement

One challenge the grantee sites faced is that the size and scope of the grants did not match the

initiative's ambitious goals. The number of collaboration activities, and the number of participants in each activity, was considered far too small to affect large, urban districts. For example, in sites with cross-sector residency programs for school leaders, the cohorts for 2013–2014 ranged from only 3 residents in Hartford to 11 residents in Philadelphia. These limited rollouts were largely in line with what grantees intended.

Achieving district-charter collaboration is likely to be a gradual and uneven process, particularly at the school and classroom levels and in sites where district-charter relationships are especially tense. At the school level, collaboration between school leaders has increased, but it was concentrated among a core group predisposed to cross-sector work. In sites that were less oriented toward this type of cooperation, the reported cross-sector interactions between teachers were minimal or nonexistent. In future grant efforts, it may be more effective to divide up potential grantees according to their predisposition to collaborating and target funds and activities in a more tailored way.

The grants have had more success fostering cross-sector working relationships between central offices, which have deepened considerably, though some rifts remain. Most respondents said that the compacts and grants have helped bring together leaders from traditional public and charter schools (and in some cases, Catholic schools). Conversations and coordination related to the compacts have developed and strengthened comfortable working relationships between leaders from all sectors. But although cross-sector relationships at the highest levels of administration were very strong, other central office staff were less inclined

The grants have highlighted three promising avenues for promoting cross-sector collaboration



- Co-location and school partnerships



- Encouragement from key city and district leaders



- Intensive training and residency programs for school leaders

to cooperate—for example, hesitating to share data on students transferring across sectors or to resolve funding issues.

GOING FORWARD

Our findings suggest several ways to enhance the implementation of district-charter collaboration grants in the future:

- **Improve messaging, not only around the broad goal of collaboration but also around specific opportunities to work together.** Principals and teachers across sectors wanted more information about their districts' or charter organizations' goals for collaboration and said collaboration activities should be better publicized.
- **Involve students in cross-sector collaboration.** Several respondents, especially in sites with smaller charter sectors, noted that tensions between sectors were not limited to school staff but also included students. These respondents suggested partnering with schools on student-based activities.
- **Ensure that partner and co-located schools are well-matched, and be specific about goals.** School staff noted that collaboration could only be useful when it was intentional, focused, sustained, and mutually beneficial. Many respondents suggested that a more purposeful connecting of schools with similar student bodies or curricula would be especially useful.
- **Use the summer for institutes or think tanks focusing on specific areas, and market those opportunities to teachers.** This was overwhelmingly suggested by teachers. "I think these are definitely some things that could happen over the summer as far as schools working with each other... Sometimes teachers have to hear something to want to be a part of it," said a teacher in a traditional public school.
- **Promote school and classroom visits for both school leaders and teachers.** Teachers and school leaders alike noted the value of focused school walkthroughs and classroom visits and suggested offering and encouraging those opportunities.
- **Use technological platforms to enable sharing.** Respondents in three sites suggested using technology to share materials across sites and to publicize collaboration activities. Organizing calendars and sharing platforms by "department instructional area or grade" would be especially useful.

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"District-Charter Collaboration Grant Implementation: Findings from Interviews and Site Visits," the full report on which this brief is based, can be found at http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/~media/publications/pdfs/education/district_charter_collaboration_rpt.pdf.

