

Issue BRIEF

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Understanding District-Charter Collaboration

The three-year study of the implementation of the district-charter collaboration grants was organized in three rounds of interim data collection and reporting and one final report. The **first report** examined early implementation (from December 2012 through winter 2013–2014) through interviews, focus groups, and observations in each site. The **second report** presented findings from surveys of teachers and principals in the 2014–2015 school year. The **third interim report** examined trajectories and impacts of implementation through the end of the grant period (December 2015) based on a second round of interviews and focus groups in late 2015. The **final report** presents synthesized findings across multiple data collection sources.

Between 2013 and 2015, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation invested in seven innovative partnerships between traditional public school districts and the charter school sector, including individual charter management organizations and local charter schools (and, in some cases, Catholic schools). The seven partnerships were in Boston, Massachusetts; Denver, Colorado; Hartford, Connecticut; New Orleans, Louisiana; New York, New York; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Spring Branch, Texas. All seven cities received three-year grants to (1) promote cross-sector collaboration on evidence-based solutions that corresponded with the Foundation's College Ready strategy; and (2) improve equity of access, resources, and accountability for the two kinds of schools. The grants ranged in size from approximately \$2 million to \$5 million.

The activities pursued under the grant differed from one city to the next, but all the grantees proposed ways to solve problems collectively and share best practices between sectors. Their approaches fall into five broad categories:

- 1. School partnerships**, including specific pairs, triads, and small groups of schools that spanned different sectors, as well as co-located schools
- 2. Leadership development**, including cross-sector residency programs for aspiring leaders, and cross-sector training for current and aspiring leaders
- 3. Common Core State Standards transitions**, a cross-sector, collective approach to help educators implement Common Core standards, including shared professional development, curriculum, and assessment materials

DATA COLLECTION

Study samples included respondents from all sectors involved in each city's partnership, which varied by city. Methods included:

- **Interviews** with 296 administrators, school leaders, and teachers during early (2013-14) and late (2015) implementation phases
- **Observations** of 15 collaboration activities in 2014
- **Surveys** of 156 principals and 486 teachers in 2015
- **Administrative data** on the number and type of participants, schools, and students involved in grant activities

4. Teacher coaching, including shared professional development not specific to the Common Core, as well as district participation in charter coaching or adoption of charter coaching models

5. Community outreach, in which the New York City Collaborative Council sponsored school study tours to promote sharing of best practices, conducted workshops for staff in both sectors, and ran a public relations campaign on successful co-location of charter and traditional public schools.

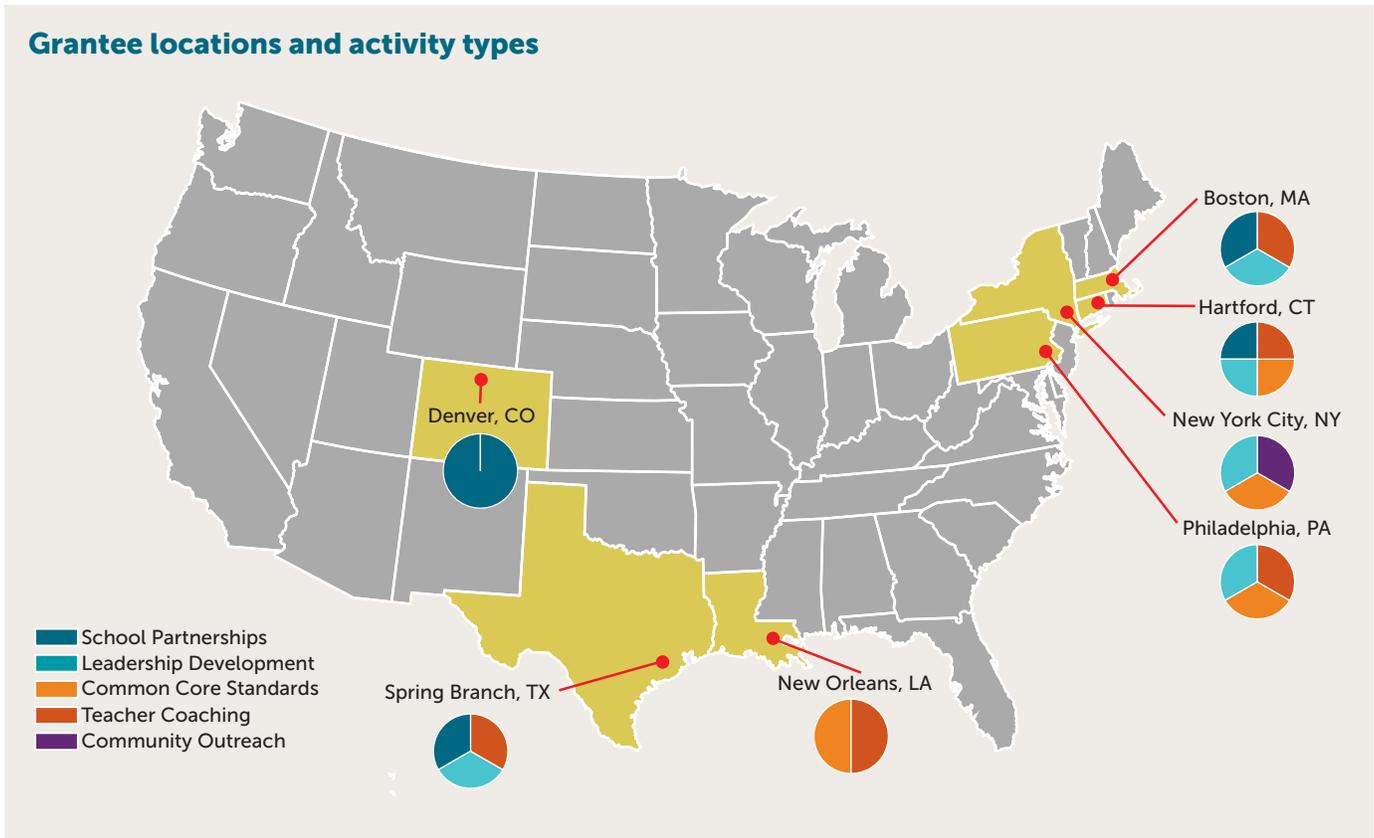
Three cities implemented school-wide programs in their schools, and are referred to here as *school-level implementation sites*. The other four cities offered activities for individual educators, and are referred to here as *participant-level implementation sites*.

Mathematica Policy Research conducted a study of the different sites' implementation of their grants. The study, based on both quantitative and

qualitative research methods, was designed to answer three main research questions:

1. What did educators think about the implementation and usefulness of the grant activities they participated in?
2. To what extent did educators in the seven grantee cities collaborate and transfer practices between the two sectors?
3. How did educators describe the climate for collaboration in their cities, and what contextual factors made cross-sector collaboration easier or harder?

Mathematica integrated the results from the seven cities to arrive at five key findings that offer important lessons learned by the grantees. In addition, we conducted a case study to provide an in-depth look at the implementation of programs in three cities that respondents highlighted as grant successes. Together, the results from the seven cross-city findings and the case study can help guide future decisions on programming and funding cross-sector collaborations.



Practices and materials shared most often

Practices Most Shared from Traditional Public Sector to Charter Sector

- Content-specific instructional strategies
- Approaches for serving English language learners and special education students
- Incorporating technology in the classroom

Practices Most Shared from Charter Sector to Traditional Public Sector

- Discipline strategies
- School culture and behavior systems
- Interim assessments
- Teacher coaching models
- Specific instructional strategies or practices

Source: District-Charter Collaboration interviews (September to November 2015).

Note: Practices shared from the traditional public sector were reported by charter sector respondents and practices shared from the charter sector were reported by traditional public sector respondents.



1 CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION DID TAKE PLACE, AND EDUCATORS SAID IT HELPED THEM EXCHANGE EFFECTIVE PRACTICES.

Although there were different experiences in different cities, survey results revealed that an average of 49 percent of principals and teachers in school-level implementation sites, and 79 percent of those in participant-level implementation sites, reported collaborating with their colleagues in another sector at least once in the previous year. This included working together on tasks such as observing classrooms, aligning operations, developing curriculum materials or instructional activities, or participating in formal events with educators from another sector.

The grants were based on the premise that cross-sector collaboration would make it easier to transfer best practices between sectors, and evidence from the study suggests that it did. The survey results revealed that 33 percent of respondents in the school-level implementation cities and 63 percent of respondents in participant-level implementation cities shared practices with or adopted practices from another sector. Among those respondents who collaborated with educators in the other sector, these rates are even higher: 63 percent and 78 percent, respectively. The pattern in the school-level implementation cities is particularly noteworthy, because not all surveyed respondents had explicitly volunteered to participate in a grant activity.

Source for graphic bottom right: District-Charter Collaboration interviews (September–November 2015).
Note: Averages based on responses from 4 to 10 school staff in each grantee city. The average for all grantee cities weights each grantee city equally.



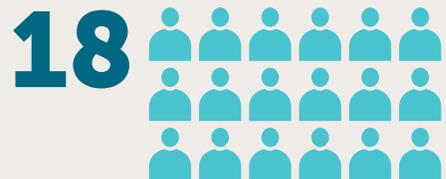
2 PARTICIPANTS THOUGHT THE GRANT ACTIVITIES HELPED THEM BUILD THEIR CROSS-SECTOR PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS.

More than two-thirds (68 percent) of principals and teachers said their professional networks grew thanks to the structured opportunities they had to collaborate with educators in the opposite sector. Principals reported an average of seven cross-sector contacts, while teachers reported an average of 18 contacts in the opposite sector. Among these principals and teachers, 43 percent said they stayed in touch with the opposite-sector colleagues who participated in their grant activity.

Principals and teachers reported increases in their cross-sector professional networks



Average number of cross-sector contacts for principals



Average number of cross-sector contacts for teachers



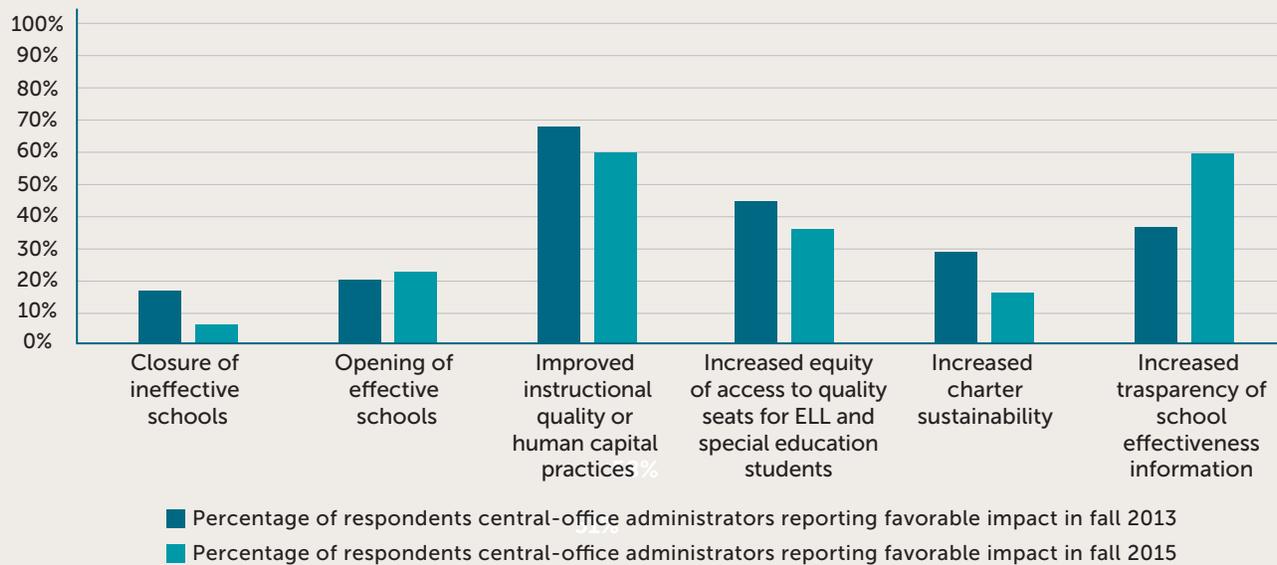
3 THE GRANT ACTIVITIES WERE CREDITED WITH HAVING A POSITIVE IMPACT, BUT THE SCOPE OF THAT IMPACT WAS LIMITED AND GENERALLY CONFINED TO THOSE DIRECTLY PARTICIPATING IN THE ACTIVITIES.

Although participants credited the grant activities with bolstering collaboration, transferring practices, and building social networks with their counterparts from the opposite sector, the scope of these outcomes did not generally extend beyond the educators who were directly participating in the grant activities, nor did the activities produce systemic change within the grant period itself. Many respondents, both in central offices and in schools, noted that the scope of grant implementation was not large enough to produce large-scale impacts, because it generally involved only a small number of schools and staff in each city. The grant impacts were seen as confined to schools, principals,

and teachers who were directly involved in the grant activities.

Substantial percentages of central office staff nonetheless believed the grant activities had favorable effects on instructional quality or human capital practices, transparency of information on the effectiveness of schools, and equity of access to quality seats for English language learners and special education students. Respondents attributed this to the activities that were designed to advance teachers' instructional practices and enhance charter management organizations' capacity to serve special education students and English language learners. They also believed that cross-sector collaboration made educators more open to sharing their school's strengths and weaknesses outside the confines of the school, and this made information about school effectiveness more transparent. Only a minority of administrators at the central office level, however, believed the collaboration grants had impacts when it came to opening effective schools, closing ineffective ones, and sustaining charter schools.

Central office-level administrators perceived few changes in grant impacts on intermediate outcomes throughout the implementation period



Source: District-Charter Collaboration interviews (September–November 2015). ^{72%}
 Note: Percentages based on 29–37 respondents for each data point in fall 2013 and 30–35 respondents for each data point in fall 2015. Percentages are weighted at the respondent level.
 ELL = English Language Learners.



4 CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION WAS INHIBITED BY STRUCTURAL FACTORS RATHER THAN LACK OF INTEREST, AND GRANT ACTIVITIES PROVIDED CRUCIAL FORMAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION.

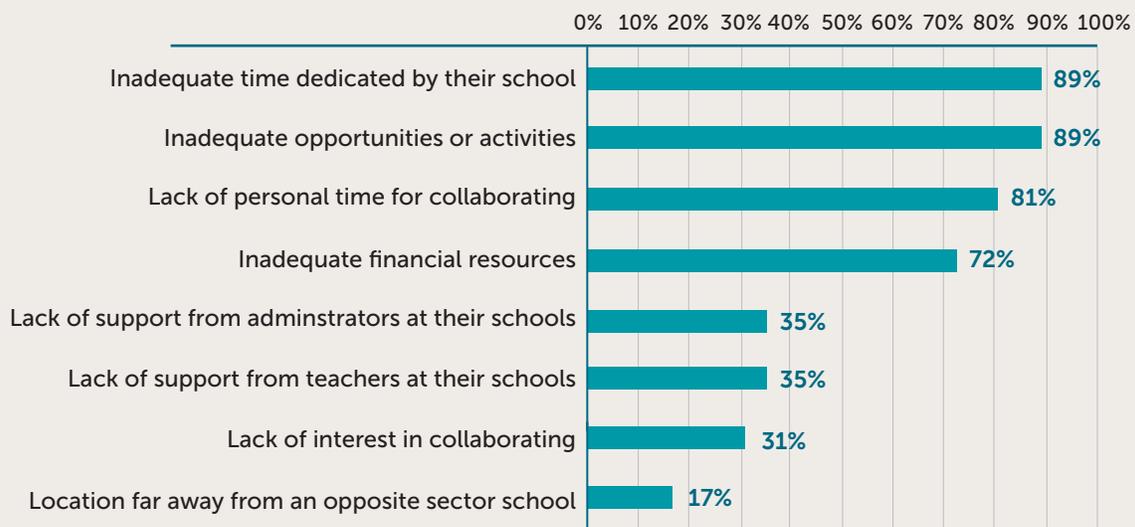
If educators consider cross-sector collaboration beneficial but its scope remains limited, it begs the question of what factors may be keeping cross-sector collaboration from developing and sustaining itself in the grantee cities. A possible explanation is that educators from the different sectors are simply not interested in collaborating with each other, but our data suggest this was not the case. Only 31 percent of principals and teachers reported their lack of personal interest as a barrier to their engaging in cross-sector collaboration. A majority of respondents in each city were positive about their experiences with cross-sector collaboration and noted that the benefits of “fresh ideas” outweighed any costs associated with working between sectors.

Educators identified structural factors as a primary impediment to cross-sector collaboration.

Many teachers said they lacked the contacts, opportunities, and time to work with educators in other sectors before the collaboration grants. Lack of time (either time dedicated by the school or personal time) was the most commonly cited barrier to collaboration, with one teacher explaining, “If it’s not within your school day, it’s not happening.”

With structural factors mentioned by so many respondents as a barrier to collaboration, the structured activities implemented through the grants were considered important facilitators of collaboration. A majority of interviewed educators indicated that without activities specifically organized to promote cross-sector collaboration, they would not have had the time and resources to set up such activities on their own. Moreover, many found the cross-sector collaboration only took place during the time allotted for the activities, which suggests that cross-sector collaboration and transfer of practices between sectors might not have happened without structured opportunities. Indeed, with the exception of those in leadership programs, including residencies for prospective principals, many other participants reported sharing practices only during scheduled formal opportunities to work together on specific content areas.

Respondents were most likely to report that a lack of time, opportunity, and resources were barriers to collaboration



■ Percentage of respondents agreeing that the factor was a barrier to collaboration

Source: District-Charter Collaboration Evaluation Survey.

Notes: We calculated results using between-city weights so that each city had an equal weight on the overall average.



5 THE CLIMATE IN MOST CITIES WAS NOT CLOSED TO CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION, ALTHOUGH SOME NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS BETWEEN SECTORS REMAIN.

Although each grant activity took place in a unique local context, no city's broader climate was characterized by respondents as highly resistant to collaboration. At the end of the grant program period, most central office administrators and school leaders at all seven grantees described the climate for collaboration in their city as neutral, in that it neither helped collaboration to take place nor prevented it. The survey results also support this notion of a neutral climate: only a small proportion of respondents said that sectors did not at all have a sense of trust between each other (19 percent) or respect for what the other sector was doing (13 percent). Likewise, only a small proportion of respondents described the extent of trust or respect for the other sector as moderate or large (18 and 27 percent, respectively).

Even though most administrators, principals, and teachers did not view the climate for collaboration as especially negative, many cited widely held negative stereotypes of the opposite sector that may affect their willingness to engage in cross-sector collaboration. Perceived competition between the sectors and reported anti-charter messaging from teachers' unions also contributed to cross-sector tensions. Interviewees felt that the sectors were competing for finite resources, facilities, and students, which hindered the sectors from seeing each other as potential partners for collaboration. Several participants in both kinds of schools reported that their participation in the collaboration grant activities diminished some of the negative perceptions they initially had about the opposite sector. By networking and building relationships with staff from the opposite sector through the grant activities, these participants were able to identify commonalities and let go of the initial assumptions they had about the other sector.

Cross-sector programs for school leaders: Hartford, Philadelphia, and New York

Program	Key components
Hartford's Achievement First Residency Program for School Leadership is a partnership between Achievement First (AF), a charter management organization, and Hartford Public Schools (HPS). The program is run by AF, and the participants are aspiring principals in HPS.	Two half-year residencies (one in an AF school and one in an HPS school); a project that residents design and implement in each school; weekly seminars during the year and intensive summer preparation program following the residency year; one-on-one coaching that extends after the residency year; and certification
Philadelphia's Pathway to Leadership in Urban Schools program was created under the Philadelphia Great Schools Compact, with support from the Philadelphia School Partnership, and it is led by The New Teacher Project. Participants include aspiring principals with leadership experience who work in district, charter, or Catholic schools.	One-year residency in one school; five-week summer institute before residency; regular professional development sessions during the school year; one-on-one coaching for the residency year and one additional year; critical friends groups; and certification
New York City's Educational Leadership Collaborative program was implemented by the Coro New York Leadership Center in partnership with NYC Collaborates. Participants included educators in various roles (teachers, school leaders, and central office staff) from both traditional public and charter sectors.	Full-day training sessions once or twice a month with lectures, small group work, and school visits; a project that participants design and implement relevant to their school and role; peer consultancy sessions to troubleshoot issues with projects

LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS: CASE STUDY

At all seven sites, educators at both the school and central office level consistently singled out two cross-sector programs for praise—one a residency for prospective principals and another a program for aspiring leaders. These programs were viewed as successes of the collaboration grant. We conducted a case study to examine three intensive, year-long programs that trained school leaders and were supported by grant funds. Below, we present aggregate findings in four categories: (1) funding and other supports required for implementation, (2) most promising components for replication, (3) program impacts, and (4) challenges and lessons learned.

1. Funding and other supports required for implementation

- Financial resources and buy-in from school leaders are considered two of the most important supports for program implementation.
- All of the programs sought funding beyond the life of the grant, and two were successful in securing it.
- Participants said their activities were most successful when supported by open-minded principals and other supervisors who invested time in the endeavor.

2. Most promising components for replication

- Leadership development sessions, coaching, and small group activities were praised as particularly successful components of the programs.
- Program staff selected participants with similar visions and planned intensive early retreats and other activities, thus fostering a sense of trust and community among the participants.

3. Program impacts

- More than two-thirds of the participants who began the residency year of both residency programs were serving as principals or assistant principals in spring of 2016.
- All three programs were perceived to have had positive intermediate impacts on the leadership qualities of principals and teachers.

- All participants in the leadership program said their professional networks expanded and they took part in more sharing of practices with staff in different sectors as a result of their participation.

4. Challenges and lessons learned

- Sustaining an active alumni network and maintaining relationships both within cohorts and between alumni and mentors was a key challenge for the residency programs.
- Determining how to measure program outcomes and what expectations to set for student achievement in schools led by alumni was a commonly mentioned challenge.
- Both residency programs faced difficulties with components of the residency placement, including finding enough host schools and engaging mentors in development of the residents.
- Many participants in both residency programs reported a lack of cohesiveness between the program's expectations about their role as residents and their day-to-day experiences in their residency schools.
- Some respondents thought their residency programs focused on instructional leadership and did not adequately address the administrative challenges and responsibilities that are an important part of a principal's job.

IMPLICATIONS

The case study underlines the importance of clear goals and project scope, specifically in the number of participants and the time period for the activities. The theory of action for district-charter collaboration that leads to systemic change—increasing the supply of and equity of access to effective schools within the cities, thereby leading to an increase in student achievement and college readiness—was ambitious. Participants in both sectors thought the three-year grant implementation period was not only too short for the activities to make a substantial difference in building cross-sector coalitions, but also too short to generate the kind of impact that would attract the level of interest and funding needed to sustain the initiatives. Collaboration Program leaders may be able to improve the sustainability and success of program activities by setting and communicating clear targets for intermediate outcomes, such as the desired increase in the

percentage of special needs and ELL students attending effective schools. But it is important to moderate any expectations of measuring a direct impact on longer-term outcomes like equity and student achievement, especially in the context of other, simultaneous reform efforts. There is a long causal chain from any of the collaboration activities to better student outcomes, particularly

better citywide student outcomes—so even though better student outcomes are the ultimate goal, they will not materialize quickly. Funders do, however, need a way to assess whether the activities are working in ways that can plausibly improve student outcomes in the future, which is why it is so critical to identify and measure intermediate outcomes.

Recommendations for current and prospective collaboration

Recommendations for current collaborators

- Provide structures and incentives for cross-sector collaboration, since lack of time is often an obstacle for collaboration
- Invest in support for implementing shared best practices, such as coaches, peer observers, or oversight from school leaders
- Involve students in collaboration by partnering with schools on student-based activities
- Measure success; then publicize and invest in successful forms of collaboration

Recommendations for prospective collaborators

- Provide clear messaging, not only on the broad goal of collaboration, but also on specific opportunities for collaboration
- View collaboration as a long-term investment that requires a larger input of resources than a single school visit to realize returns
- Promote transparency on school effectiveness for schools in all sectors
- Implement specific activities that have demonstrated success

