

Charters and Districts (Begin to) Collaborate

Common challenges drive joint efforts at a local level

by LAURA PAPPANO



District and charter school teachers train together to become principals in Connecticut.

The teachers gathered on a Thursday afternoon at the offices of Achievement First, a charter network based in New Haven, Conn., to take part in a seminar titled “Meeting Facilitation.” Clustered in groups, and balancing sandwiches and cupcakes on their laps (it was someone’s birthday), they discussed how to run a staff meeting when not all participants agree on an issue.

All 10 teachers in the seminar are aspiring principals, but only two work for the charter network. The rest are teachers from district schools enrolled in the one-year Residency Program for School Leadership, a collaboration among Achievement First and three public school districts in Connecticut.

The idea that charter schools and district schools can team up might seem far-fetched. Historically, after all, not only have districts and charters not worked together, but they have also failed to talk nicely about, to, or with one another. In New York City, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Illinois, Massachusetts, and elsewhere, harsh language, protests, and lawsuits have characterized the divide. Original visions of charter “laboratories” hatching and sharing innovations have often been usurped by tensions over money, facilities, which students they serve, enrollment caps, work rules, and educational approaches.

But faced with similar challenges—Common Core implementation, teacher development, leadership training, and new plans for universal enrollment (which offers parents both district and charter school options at registration)—in some cities the two sectors are now exploring the benefits of joining forces.

“When you have a common challenge, the cooperation accelerates,” says Don Shalvey, a deputy director at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation who is working to promote charter-district collaborations. While Shalvey notices that there is “more facing that this is the right thing to do than actually doing it,” he sees progress. “Ten years ago, this was an outrageous notion. Today, it is an ambitious idea.”

“I think there is a softening” of relations, observes Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, “but it’s not widespread.”

“Cracking the Code” for Kids

The Residency Program for School Leadership grew out of conversations five years ago between New Haven school officials and leaders at Achievement First, a network of 29 charter schools in Connecticut, New York, and Rhode Island. Gemma Joseph Lumpkin, the New Haven public school administrator who coordinated the district side, says former superintendent Reginald Mayo saw in the high-performing charter network “opportunities for us to have some sharing of lessons that would benefit our kids.”

The district, Lumpkin notes, has a reform mind-set (and it has won national attention for collaborating with the union on teacher evaluation). “We will not be staid and do things the same way forever,” she says. “We are really trying to crack the code on, ‘How do we best serve the diverse needs of our students?’” That work, she says, requires training more and better school leaders. Thus, the residency program.

The program offers teachers, who now also come from Bridgeport and Hartford, exposure to Achievement First ideas, systems, and mentoring. District residents spend the first semester embedded in a charter school and the second in a district school with a high-performing principal. They attend weekly seminars (like the one on facilitating a meeting) and receive individual coaching for the entire year and for the first year of placement.

One challenge: It’s a “partnership,” but the program is mostly run by Achievement First. “That is where the tension is. Are we there just trying to learn from them?” asks Lumpkin, who wants learning to go both ways. She believes the charter leaders can learn from the district’s work with English language learners and with children with special needs and behavior issues.

Compacts: A Start

Collaboration may not be easy or comfortable, but there are incentives for giving it a try. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has given \$25 million since 2010 to spur creation of district-charter compacts in 21 cities. The compacts—written promises to collaborate by sharing resources, data, ideas, or doing joint projects—have yielded mixed results, according to those involved with compacts and a

2013 report by the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education. Some are little more than good intentions on paper, while others spur active cross-fertilization that may advance student learning.

But working together can pay. The most common successes among compact cities include training and professional development that allow districts and charter schools to address common concerns and share resources.

In Philadelphia, Miles Wilson, director of the Great Schools Compact, says the district invited 40 charters to join their Common Core prep program, which cut costs from \$30 to \$6 per teacher. The compact is also in the second year of a training program run by TNTP (formerly The New Teacher Project) to prepare talented teachers from district, charter, and parochial schools for principal posts.

Wilson said local leaders wanted a program that was "Philly-centric" and addressed a shared local frustration: "Most traditional schools of education don't prepare leaders to be successful in an urban school environment."

Initially, Wilson says, all sides feared losing top teachers to other schools once they were trained, but he painted a collective challenge. "Educators, teacher leaders already know where the open positions are," he argues. "The greater conversation is, 'How do we create a system of high-performing schools that has the leadership talent stay in Philadelphia?'"

Finding Common Ground

As Wilson observes, geography can be a unifying force, particularly in urban settings, where charter and district educators face common problems particular to their communities or neighborhoods (see below sidebar, "Mini-Compacts for Local Projects"). It also helps when individual school leaders have worked in both sectors, which Shalvey says is more and more common.

Will McKenna spent five years leading a Baltimore elementary school and two years working in the central office before co-founding Afya Public Charter School in 2007 with four other Baltimore public school educators. "I am very connected in the district," says McKenna, whose middle school welcomes half of its 108 incoming sixth graders yearly from Brehms Lane Elementary School, located a half-mile away.

Given the proximity and relationship of the two schools, McKenna understood the social and mental health issues in the high-poverty neighborhood that fed academic and discipline challenges at Brehms Lane. So this past summer he secured a \$50,000 grant to run a six-week summer camp for 70 Brehms Lane students, including 50 sixth-graders entering Afya. Critically, he staffed the camp with teachers from both schools, exposing each to new ideas.

While at the camp, for example, Gabrielle Mink, a literacy coach at Brehms Lane, noted the intense teamwork among charter staff that she now plans to bring to her school. "Teachers between classes will send a text and say, 'Hey look out for this person, they are having a rough morning,' so they know what they will get when [the students] enter the classroom." Meanwhile, Monica McClain, a sixth-grade humanities teacher at Afya, credits Brehms Lane teachers with helping them forge relationships with students while reminding charter teachers used to strict behavior codes that sometimes kids are just silly, not acting out. McClain says she grew "more patient with those behaviors." One Brehms Lane teacher was so "magical" in his approach, she says, that students were eager to please him, making camp discipline (based on Afya rules) more easily accepted. "It wasn't as foreign to the kids because they bought into it," she says.

Sharing a Focus on Families and Students

How well relationships work also depends on the pressures leaders in the two sectors face. Rules governing charters, including funding formulas and teacher contracts, vary among states and districts and can be a source of friction that challenges collaboration efforts.

In Baltimore, also a compact city, both district and charter teachers are part of the union and can earn \$20,000 extra by becoming "model" teachers. The additional salary is automatically covered by the central budget for district schools—but not for charters. When six of McKenna's teachers applied for and earned the designation, he suddenly had to raise or find another \$120,000. "Not all charters are thrilled to have these model teachers on the hook for the \$20,000 extra salary," he says. "It has become a sore point between charters and the district."

But where charters feel this pinch, they recognize other benefits, like the ability to cap and control enrollments, which district school leaders envy. Bobbi Macdonald, executive director of City Neighbors Foundation, a Baltimore charter provider, can hold kindergarten enrollment to 22, while Patricia Otway Drummond, principal of nearby Hamilton Middle/Elementary School, serves all who walk in the door. Right now "we are bursting at the seams" with 750 students, says Drummond. "We feel it, the teachers feel it, the students feel it." Having stable enrollment is a key to academic success, says Drummond, noting that when charters tout their high performance, "they are not playing by the same rules. That does create some resentment."

It does not, however, keep Drummond, Macdonald, and Rebecca Malone, principal at St. Francis of Assisi School, from jointly hosting a teacher conference, a student art show, and a literary magazine. They also meet monthly to share ideas ranging from creating outdoor

educational gardens to ways to display student art. Despite pressures, the relationship works because they are three strong schools anchoring the vibrant Lauraville neighborhood. “If Hamilton were not already a high-performing school,” says Drummond, “it would be hard to have a functioning relationship where we feel we are all on the same playing field.”

The shared geography, observes Macdonald, forces a shared perspective. “We want schools and families to thrive. When we focus on that, it allows us to come around a table and say, ‘Hmmm, What can you do to help me and what are some of the things I can do to help you?’”

Keeping an Open Mind

Despite good feelings, Macdonald, Drummond, and Malone say there are limitations to collaboration that arise from different school cultures. For example, a plan in one school that lets students vote to have permission to wear hats indoors won’t fly at another. The partnership, says Macdonald, “is not about trying to convert each other.”

That’s why in Connecticut candidates for the leadership residency are assessed for their open-mindedness. Lumpkin knows residents find aspects of charter culture, including strict discipline, challenging, but she urges them to “embrace the dissonance.” “I tell them, ‘You will see things that you are not comfortable with—and you will see systems that will fascinate you and you will embrace.’”

Tara Cass, principal of the Nathan Hale School in New Haven, who was a resident in the school leadership program in 2011–2012, did struggle with aspects of discipline in the Achievement First School where she was placed. “There are ‘no excuses’ as to why you don’t have your uniform,” she says, “but there are.”

Yet, she appreciated the efficiency. “There was instruction happening in every single classroom from the time it started to the time it ended.” Cass said Achievement First systems—including for coaching teachers, monitoring student behavior, and looking at student work—fed productivity. When she became principal, says Cass, “the first thing I did was restructure the whole organization,” adapting some charter systems to her needs.

That’s fine by Matt Taylor, director of the residency program who came to Achievement First after working in district schools in Chicago, Boston, and Miami. “We are not saying, ‘This is what you have to do,’” he says. “We’re saying, ‘This works for us. Come work with us and see what works for you. Rent it.’”

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S. Yatsko, E. C. Nelson, and R. Lake. *District-Charter Collaboration Compacts: Interim Report*. Seattle: Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2013.