

Describing and Measuring District-Charter Collaboration in New York City: A Research-Practice Partnership

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Overview/Research Questions

Charters were initially intended to serve as labs of innovation that could transfer new, promising practices to district schools. However, as charters expanded, collaboration was often overshadowed by competition between the two sectors. This study examines the programs the New York City Department of Education (DOE) created to facilitate and support instructional sharing and relationship-building across the district and charter sectors, known as the District-Charter Partnership (DCP) initiative. Specifically, this study examines the first year of DCP implementation and addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What elements are key to strong cross-sector instructional practice sharing among schools? What are the challenges that exist in this work?
- (2) Does DCP facilitate the cross-sector transfer of promising practices and build a culture of cross-sector collaboration?
- (3) How can program and research teams in a large urban school district work together to create “useable knowledge” to inform policy and practice, particularly around district-charter collaboration?

Methods

Participants

Researchers examined cross-sector collaboration among 175 educators in 38 schools participating in two DCP initiatives: the District-Charter Collaborative (DCC) and the Campus District-Charter Partnerships (CDCP) programs. DCC engages district and charter schools in learning communities of four schools that work together to improve practices in a particular learning focus area, including math and ELL instruction and restorative practices. CDCP engages district and charter schools on the same campus in structured collaboration that facilitates the sharing of best practices and the development of joint projects around instruction, student engagement, and parent engagement.

Research Activities

The research team conducted a comprehensive mixed-methods evaluation to understand the implementation and early outcomes of DCP during the 2016-2017 school year. Methods included:

- Beginning-of-year and end-of-year surveys with 175 participants
- Focus groups and semi-structured interviews with 50 participants
- 60 field observations of program activities, including cross-sector school intervisitations and collaborative meetings.

Researchers analyzed data across sources in order to determine themes.

Results

(1) Regardless of the program, there were similar **elements of strong school-level district-charter collaboration**, including:

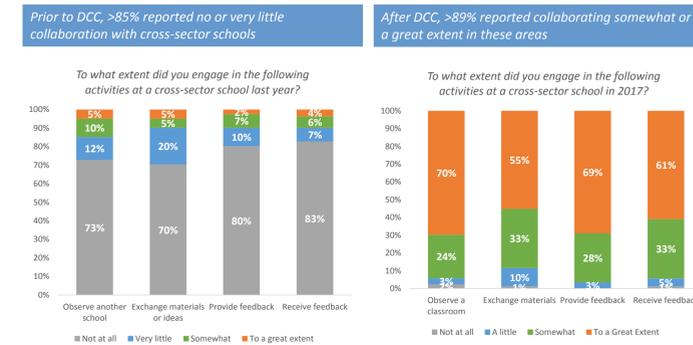
ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION
Shared Strategic Vision and Goals for Collective Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-articulation of clear, realistic partnership vision and goals • Alignment between the collective aims and those of the individual schools • Shared responsibility and accountability for achieving goals
Experiential Learning that Builds Capacity and Improves Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured learning opportunities that allow educators to see practice in action • Experiences that reduce barriers and isolation between district and charter schools by providing opportunities for problem sharing, support, and joint learning
Development of a Connected Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norming and trust building activities aimed at (a) recognizing shared cross-sector values, practices, and challenges and acknowledging and accepting differences, and (b) developing a respectful environment where participants can sensitively express debate, take risks, and share with others without fear of rejection • Emphasis on the equal status of participants within and across school teams, so that all participants feel valued and take ownership regardless of their school role or sector
Structures to Support Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured, dedicated, and compensated time and space set aside that limits disruption to school routines • Clear and consistent structures and protocols for facilitation, problem-solving, and collaboration • Skilled facilitation from DOE staff that supports collaboration through resource-sharing, relationship-building, targeted support, and promotion of school-level ownership of the work

There were also several **challenges of district-charter collaboration** at the school level, including:

- **Transferring practices between district and charter schools** when they have different levels of autonomy around instructional and operational practices, and sometimes different levels of resources for staff, facilities, and other activities.
- **Ensuring that charter and district schools are well-matched in their experience, willingness to collaborate, and instructional experience**, so that there is reciprocal learning rather than one-way learning.
- **Shifting mindsets and breaking down misconceptions that exist across sectors** so that the two can effectively collaborate to enhance teacher practice and student learning.
- **Ensuring that the same individuals are always at the table** to keep the work moving forward and to build and deepen relationships over time.

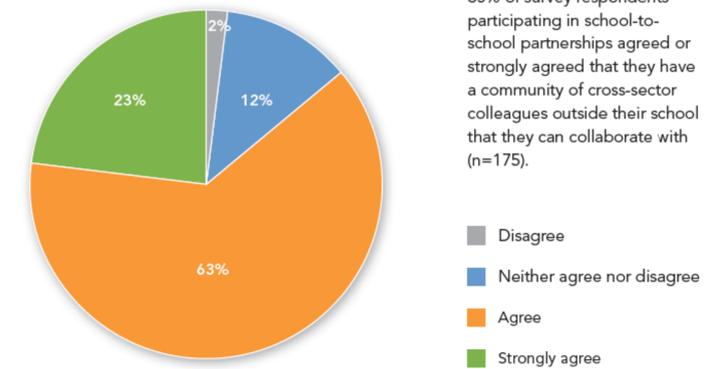
Results

(2) The majority of participants indicated that participating in school-level partnerships **helped foster collaboration and sharing** between district and charter schools where it hadn't existed before.



The majority of participants also indicated that participating in school-level partnerships **supported the building of a culture of collaboration** between district and charter staff characterized by commitment and reciprocal learning.

BUILDING A DISTRICT-CHARTER COMMUNITY



Results

Some participants indicated that there is room to deepen cross-sector relationships in Year 2 of the program, particularly around holding each other accountable for improvement, sharing more vulnerabilities and struggles with instruction, and enhancing communication outside of required collaboration meetings.

(3) The research team identified the following **key components of strong research-practice partnerships** in an urban district.

- **Engaging program teams in developing a theory of change** that reflects their understanding of how program components lead to program outcomes
- **Co-designing research questions and data collection tools** with the program team aligned to the theory of change that take into account the unique needs and features of the initiative as well as the program team's interests.
- **Designing formative research reports** that clearly and concisely communicate actionable findings to program staff and helping staff use these findings to support iterative program development.

Conclusions and Next Steps

This study codifies elements that support instructional practice-sharing between district and charter schools. Based on the study's findings, the evaluators recommend that districts developing cross-sector partnerships focus on:

- Building community among cross-sector schools through norming and trust building activities
- Developing structured, experiential learning opportunities that engage both district and charter schools in sharing and learning around a common learning goal

The research also indicates that highly structured cross-sector school collaboration initiatives can result in the development of a culture of collaboration and best practice sharing.

Further research may involve:

- The use of social network theory to map changing relationships among district and charter schools in DCP over time
- A qualitative examination of strategies for sustaining district-charter collaboration in New York City

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