**Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness**

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- **Title**: Describing and Measuring District-Charter Collaboration in New York City: A Research-Practice Partnership
- **First and second choice of conference section**:
  - Choice 1: Research ↔ Practice in Local Educational Agencies
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- **Abstract** in a **PDF document** (see below)
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## Abstract

**Background and Purpose:**
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 (Wohlstetter et. al., 2013; Finn et. al, 2016). This study will shed light on the DOE's efforts to encourage cross-sector instructional sharing and relationship-building to improve system-wide teaching and learning, and emphasize that, working collaboratively, district and charters can enhance practices for all children. The study has two main goals: (a) to add to a nascent research base about the elements that support cross-sector instructional practice sharing and the challenges that exist in this work and (b) to elucidate the ways in which program and research staff within a large urban school district can work together to create "useable knowledge" to inform policy and practice, particularly around district-charter collaboration.

**Setting/Participants/Intervention**
This study examines the programs the NYC Department of Education (DOE) created to facilitate and support meaningful collaboration across the district and charter sector, known as the District-Charter Partnership (DCP) initiative. DCP involves several partnerships at the school, district, and system levels aimed at facilitating the exchange of innovative instructional ideas across sectors to increase capacity for all New York City public schools. Specifically, the paper will look at the implementation of DCP in Year 1, where partnership efforts involved 130 district and charter schools across the city.

**Table 1.** District-Charter Partnership Programs in New York City

| LEVEL | PROGRAM | DESCRIPTION | # OF SCHOOLS |
|---|---|---|---|
| **School-to-School** | District-Charter Collaborative | Quads of schools (2 district, 2 charter) engage in structured collaboration around a Learning Focus Area | 27 |
| | Campus District-Charter Partnerships | District and charter schools on the same campus collaborate to share practices and engage in joint projects | 11 |
| **District-Wide** | Superintendent District-Charter Partnerships | Superintendents implement district-wide initiatives that support teaching and learning in district and charter schools | All schools in Districts 1, 13, and 16 |
| **System-Wide** | District-Charter Special Education Partnership | DOE provides targeted support to charter schools in delivering services to students with disabilities | All charter schools |
| | NYC DOE-Uncommon Impact Partnership | DOE and Uncommon Schools collaborate to provide professional learning opportunities for district teachers and leaders | 49 (in Districts 16, 18, 19, 21, and 23) |

**Research Design/Data Collection and Analysis**

This study used a mixed-methods approach to address two main research questions about first year DCP implementation: (1) What elements are key to successful district-charter collaboration? (2) What are the key challenges? Researchers administered surveys to approximately 175 educators participating in the program, led focus groups and semi-structured interviews with approximately 50 participants, and conducted approximately 60 field observations of program activities, including cross-sector school intervisitations and collaborative meetings. Researchers then analyzed data across sources in order to determine themes.

**Findings/Results.** The study revealed several findings about the key components and challenges of instructional practice-sharing across sectors, as well as ways that researchers and program teams in an urban district can work together to ensure useable research findings.

*Key components of cross-sector collaboration*
- **Engaging in open and honest conversations** about shared cross-sector values, practices, and challenges as well as differences that exist between sectors
- **Developing deep cross-sector relationships**, where participants can sensitively express debate, take risks, and share with others without fear of rejection
- **Ensuring equal status across district and charter schools,** i.e. emphasizing that every school – district and charter – has something to share and something to learn

- **Providing experiences that reduce barriers and isolation between district and charters schools** by offering opportunities for problem sharing, support, and joint learning

*Challenges of cross-sector collaboration*
- **Transferring systems, policies, and practices between schools** that have different levels of autonomy, accountability, and, in some cases, funding
- **Shifting mindsets and breaking down misconceptions** that exist across sectors so that they two can effectively collaborate to enhance teacher practice and student learning

*Key components of strong research-practice partnerships in an urban district*
- **Engaging program teams in developing a theory of change** for their initiative that reflects their understanding of how program components lead to program outcomes
- **Co-designing research questions** 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
- **Carefully designing research reports** that clearly and concisely communicate actionable findings to program staff

## Conclusions

There is an emerging research base highlighting the structures, systems, and processes necessary to support interschool collaboration (Atkinson et. al., 2007; Connolly et. al., 2016). To date, however, this research has not focused on the essential components of collaboration between district and charter schools. In this way, it does not take into account the complex dynamics involved in forging collaborative relationships across sectors, dynamics often affected by a history of competition and misconceptions. This study seeks to add to the research by codifying the elements that support cross-sector instructional practice sharing and the challenges that exist in this work. Based on the study's findings, the evaluators recommend that districts developing cross-sector partnerships focus on (a) building community among cross-sector schools through norming and trust building activities and (b) developing structured learning opportunities that engage both district and charter schools in sharing and learning. Findings also indicate that intentional collaboration between researchers and program teams in an urban district can support the development of more useable knowledge around district and charter collaboration.