

TEACH +PLUS

Opportunities for Teachers,
Results for Urban Students

Our Own Best Resource: Utilizing the Collective Talents of Boston Teachers and Schools

Background

As teachers from Boston-area district and charter schools, we want to help forge pathways for genuine collaboration amongst district and charter schools that will benefit teachers and students across our city.

We know that all high-performing schools, no matter if they are district or charter schools, are using innovative strategies to close the achievement gap. We want to increase the number of schools that are high-performing to ensure that all students of Boston have the opportunity to be college and career ready.

Since we know that the education reform legislation of 2010 made space for double the number of charter schools seats in Boston, it simply makes sense for charter and traditional schools in Boston to share solutions to common challenges. As teachers, we constantly strive to find a better way to educate and serve our own students. It is time to bring that same drive to a larger scale in our city.

In this document, we highlight examples of district-charter collaboration from cities across the country that Boston's education leaders could learn from. Also, we highlight concrete examples of "best practices" from schools here in the Greater Boston area and suggest next steps that we believe will move this work forward. As teachers, we bring concrete, specific advice that we hope will be helpful around the following systems that support teachers:

Sharing Instructional Best Practices and Teacher-Created Materials

Through a charter-district compact in **New York City**, teachers from across the city will be able to showcase and share their successes at an "Annual Shared Practices Summit." We advocate doing something similar in Boston. The **Massachusetts Center for Charter Public School Excellence** and the **Center for Collaborative Education** run forums and school visits where teachers share best practices. We advocate for more actively encouraging teachers from all schools to showcase their work and learn from others through these avenues and more. In the past, **Boston Public Schools**, in conjunction with the **Boston Teachers Union**, offered teachers the opportunity to design professional leadership projects which were then showcased. Unfortunately, this type of best practice sharing is no longer funded, but should be funded and maintained again.

The **Achievement Network** offers a great example of a subset of charter, pilot, and traditional district school teachers coming together around student data and sharing best practices. Teachers in this network can connect with others to find out specifically how they are able to yield strong results with students. Additionally, Achievement Network teachers from diverse schools meet for shared professional development and forums aimed at spreading best practices.

At many local charter schools, teachers are required to upload lessons, materials, and unit plans to a shared

server that is easily accessible and well organized. This type of shared server helps schools create an archive of resources for teachers to share and improve upon. We advocate for sharing, but we must be clear that quality controls need to be in place; only high-quality lesson plans and materials ought to be shared widely.

Next Steps:

Boston school leaders and professional development providers need to commit to making their resources available in a centralized location. Boston has a plethora of resources but they cannot be fully utilized until all schools are able to easily access them.

Teachers across Boston are eager to share resources with their colleagues down the hall and around the city and would welcome an online platform that would facilitate this type of exchange. We envision a system that would provide multiple levels for potential collaboration, so that after posting a lesson or a unit, a teacher could receive feedback, answer questions, post videos, or even set up a classroom visit with a fellow Boston teacher. MassONE is one potential avenue for broad sharing that is currently underutilized, while Google and Microsoft are constantly developing new tools for educators to communicate and exchange documents. Teachers should serve as quality control assessors for materials submitted to a central server. Qualified teachers who serve in this capacity should be compensated for their work.

Professional Development

Right now, **Boston Public Schools (BPS)** has a much broader offering of professional development than any one charter school can provide. Opening up professional development to all teachers citywide would allow teachers to take advantage of the many opportunities that exist and would also allow traditional and charter school teachers to share their knowledge and expertise.

Many schools participate in a “For Teachers, By Teachers” model of professional development where teachers offer coursework to their colleagues in a particular area of expertise. If these types of opportunities were available across schools, teachers would have increased access to the wealth of knowledge available throughout the city. This model would allow for teachers to form relationships across many different schools within the city, which will augment collaboration at a grassroots level and provide

a greater network within which teachers can work to maximize student learning and performance.

One example of an integrated charter-district professional development opportunity is that offered by the **Achievement Network**. For example, they held a workshop on open response that allowed teachers to examine and assess students’ work in teams that included teachers from district and charter schools. Together, the teachers analyzed their students’ open responses from the most recent assessment to identify areas of strength and weakness. They also worked to create an “anchor” set of open responses by looking through their student samples and selecting ones that met the criteria for different levels of performance. Lastly, the groups of teachers shared strategies for how to improve student performance based on the student data. This experience allowed for different strategies and areas of knowledge to be shared among teachers, across schools, and traversing district-charter lines.

Next Steps:

There are many ways to take advantage of technology for professional development. Boston Public Schools already uses My Learning Plan as a central hub for professional development offerings. If charter schools were able to add their site-based PD sessions, then teachers across the city would be able to access a much broader array of PD offerings. Additionally, teachers from all different schools would have the opportunity to interact with each other on a more frequent basis.

Hiring Practices

Currently, the hiring system for BPS is separate and on a distinctly different timeline from hiring systems at any of the individual charter schools. This makes it difficult for teachers to apply to both district and charter schools simultaneously, something many applicants would prefer to do. We advocate for a common timeline and hiring protocol so that teachers would be able to consider positions at both charter and public schools.

Next Steps:

We propose that district and charter schools agree on a hiring timeline that would allow applicants the possibility of applying to all Boston schools within the same basic timeframe. We know there is great variability hiring practices within schools:

some schools require teaching candidates to teach demo lessons, meet with teachers, or submit sample course materials, while other schools identify strong applicants with a more streamlined process. We propose that school leaders share hiring practices and materials to ensure that the hiring of candidates aligns with each school's vision and set of priorities.

Teacher Evaluation

In Massachusetts, changes are coming to teacher evaluation which will require BPS and some charter schools to rethink evaluation procedures and tools. Many charter schools have spent years developing and improving evaluation protocols and rubrics that will likely meet or exceed the state's new expectations; new regulations from the state make this a prime time for those schools to share what they have learned.

In **Los Angeles**, charter and district schools are sharing teacher evaluation protocols and the same can be done in Boston. For example, the **Edward W. Brooke Charter School** uses an ambitious and specific rubric for teacher evaluation. The standards that teachers are evaluated on are also used to plan professional development and to set individual and school-wide goals. Teachers are able to sharpen their classroom practice along with building additional skills that contribute to a robust teaching and learning community. The rubric also serves as a tool for self-reflection; teachers complete one for themselves to share with their supervisor before the official mid-year evaluation meeting. **Boston Preparatory Charter Public School** has developed several observation protocols that include school-wide observable goals and allow teachers to garner feedback from a wide variety of people with regularity. Additionally, the **Boston Teachers Union Pilot School** is using a modified Peer Assistance & Review protocol, where expert teachers mentor and evaluate new or struggling teachers.

Next Steps:

We recommend creating an easily searchable database of evaluation rubrics and protocols. This should include contact information so that school leaders can reach out to each other more easily to discuss resources. This could be accompanied by an in-person forum for principals and teacher leaders to provide background information and advice about potential pitfalls.

Teacher Retention

We know firsthand that sustainability and teacher “burn out” are a problem in many schools. It is imperative that schools find a way to retain top-notch teachers in the classroom. Teacher retention can be strengthened by a variety of supports, including access to high quality professional development opportunities; integration of interns, parents and community organizations to support teachers; differentiated opportunities for development and career advancement depending on career stage; and providing teachers with scholarship opportunities for graduate study and educational travel.

Boston Public Schools and a variety of charter schools currently allow teachers to job share, which is one way to help teachers continue to feel satisfied in the classroom while also pursuing a different passion or area of expertise. In BPS, the structure is wide open, allowing teachers and principals to decide on the best arrangement. Additionally, BPS has implemented the **New Teacher Developer Program**, whereby each teacher new to the district receives a New Teacher Developer (NTD), a formal mentor who assists new teachers with planning, pedagogy and reflection. This program is one way in which Boston is working to retain the talent of its newest teachers, while simultaneously offering a meaningful leadership opportunity for veteran teachers. **Prospect Hill Academy (PHA)** has experimented with a partnership with **Somerville Public Schools** in which a high-performing PHA teacher can take a year-long sabbatical to work with teachers in Somerville. According to the compacts being developed in both **Nashville** and **New York City**, teachers and principals will be able to take a leave of absence from their current positions to work in a different school—district or charter. This type of exchange allows for collaboration at the level where it matters most: the classroom.

Another sabbatical-like opportunity is the chance for international study. Teachers at the **Academy of the Pacific Rim** have partnered with a variety of external organizations that have provided structured international study opportunities in places such as China, Japan, Mexico, Lebanon, Morocco, Israel, and Egypt. Through the **Fund for Teachers, Boston Plan for Excellence** offers travel grants to individual teachers or small groups that offer the chance for teachers to enrich their curricula, but also the chance for personal renewal.

Next Steps:

Charter and district schools need a forum for sharing the best practices in engaging high-performing teachers and keeping them in the profession. Keeping the best and brightest minds in Boston's classrooms should be a concerted group effort. Teachers are truly a school system's most valuable resource. We ought to be looking to schools where teacher satisfaction is high and year-to-year turnover is low for clues to tackling this issue.

Recognizing Great Teachers

The many outstanding teachers across schools should be better recognized. This is a lever for improving retention and for elevating our profession. Demonstrably effective teachers should take real leadership in developing curricula and developing peer teachers through leading PD or mentoring. Teachers who are proven at making gains in students' learning should be chosen for vacation academies and summer school positions. The **Sontag Prize in Urban Education** honors teachers – locally and nationally – and is another clear example of charter and district teachers being brought together to benefit students.

Next Steps:

BPS has an excellent track record when it comes to helping effective educators achieve National Board Certification. Many local charter school teachers are interested in National Board certification, but may be hesitant to tackle this challenge without supportive mentors. Allowing charter school teachers to participate in BPS's National Board support groups would encourage more teachers to engage in this meaningful professional development and provide an opportunity for teachers from different school settings to achieve certification.

Additionally charter schools around the city are experimenting with ways to recognize and reward their most successful teachers. Next year, at the Edward W. Brooke Charter School, teachers who have attained excellent student achievement results for three out of four consecutive years and who have demonstrated strong collaborative skills will achieve Master Teacher status. Master Teachers will take on leadership responsibilities and will receive additional compensation. With the shared goal of recognizing and retaining great teachers, we should seek to learn from the successes and drawbacks of these programs.

Conclusion

Genuine collaboration will take work, but we believe it is essential. We do not have time for teachers and schools to constantly recreate the wheel while students pass through the system unable to benefit from the pooled resources of the best and the brightest teachers and leaders across the city of Boston.

Support for the ideas we outlined exists – many teachers count themselves as supporters, despite the historical discontent between the charter and district spheres. We believe it is time to move past politicized disagreement and embrace a future where we can stand together to give Boston's students the best education we can collectively offer.

Authored by:

Boston Teaching Policy Fellows, 2009-2011

Sean Brooks, Dever-McCormack K-8 School

Elizabeth Butler, Codman Academy Charter Public School

Laura Cennamo, Tobin K-8 School

Sarah Cooper, Blackstone Elementary School

Judy Fahey, Boston Collegiate Charter School

Laura Fleming, Community Charter School of Cambridge

Adam Gray, Monument High School

Karene-Sean Hines, Timilty Middle School

Greg Hurley, Malden High School

Karen McCarthy, Brighton High School

Talmadge Nardi, Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter School

Christina Porter, Revere High School

Wendy Soref, Edward W. Brooke Charter School

Tim Suba, Boston Preparatory Charter Public School

Kristina Sullivan, Graham & Parks Alternative School

Brinda Tahiliani, New Mission High School

Shakera Walker, Young Achievers Pilot K-8 School

Teach Plus

Maria Fenwick, Executive Director, Boston

Heather Peske, National Director of Programs