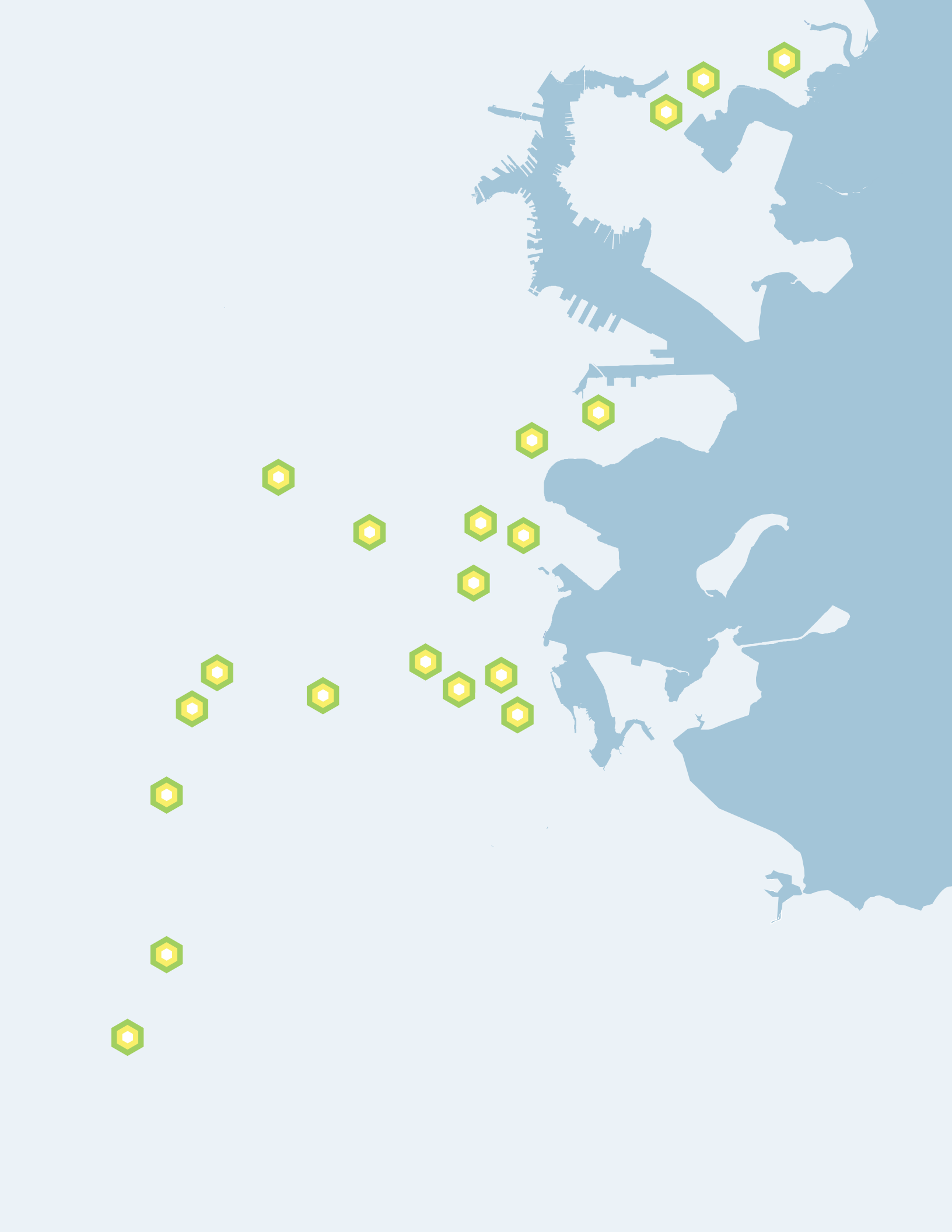


2014

GREENHOUSE SCHOOLS IN BOSTON

School Leadership Practices
Across a High-Performing Charter Sector



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INTRODUCTION

Boston’s public charter school sector has received national attention for its strong student outcomes. Independent studies have found that Boston charter school students, on the whole, are learning at much faster rates than their peers in charter schools across the country, as well as in local district schools—even while Boston Public Schools remains one of the highest performing urban districts in the country.¹ What’s happening in Boston’s charter schools to make them so effective?

We think part of the answer may lie in a set of specific school leadership practices that cultivate environments that promote quality instruction. After all, great teachers are the heart of successful schools, but teachers alone can’t make a school succeed or fail. The environments where they work, and particularly the school leaders who nurture and shape those environments, play an important role in setting teachers up to do their best work in the classroom.

We’ve been investigating the importance of school environment and leadership practices for several years, using a survey tool called Instructional Culture Insight, which measures teachers’ perceptions of their school environments. In *Greenhouse Schools: How Schools Can Build Cultures Where Teachers and Students Thrive* (2012), we found that school culture matters for the retention of high-performing teachers and for student achievement overall, and we identified a handful of elements that seem to be consistent across schools with particularly positive environments—places we refer to as “greenhouse schools.”

We wondered if part of the explanation for Boston charter schools’ robust student growth could be stronger climates for excellent teaching.

These elements are important because the conditions that support great teaching also promote student learning. We have found that, on average, students perform 16 percentage points higher in numeracy and 14 percentage points higher in literacy in greenhouse schools,² compared to schools in the *same district or charter sector* that perform toward the bottom on our measure of school environment. Based on these findings elsewhere, we wondered if part of the explanation for Boston charter schools’ robust student growth could be stronger climates for excellent teaching.

This paper revisits the original premise of *Greenhouse Schools* by looking closely at what’s happening in Boston’s charter sector. To do this, we used the Instructional Culture Insight tool to measure school culture in around two-thirds of Boston’s charter schools.³ Exploring school cultures—and the school leadership practices that contribute to those cultures—in a set of high-performing schools may provide strategies that school leaders in both charter and district schools elsewhere can put to use. This paper does not compare practices between charter schools and traditional district schools, but instead compares Boston charter schools with more than 200 charter schools across the country to identify what they do differently to achieve such different results.

In the Boston charter schools we studied, school leaders focus on:

- **Consistent Learning Environments That Enable a Focus on Student Growth**

The participating Boston charter schools exhibit strong learning environments, shaped by clear expectations for both students and teachers, which lay the groundwork for student growth. Compared to their peers in charter schools nationally, surveyed Boston charter school teachers are nearly 50 percent more likely to agree that their school has a clear set of behavioral standards. They’re also more likely to agree that their school implements a rigorous academic curriculum.

- **Teacher Development Through Observation, Feedback and Peer Modeling**

Teachers in Boston charter schools receive seven more observations annually than teachers elsewhere—with Boston teachers in schools with the strongest instructional cultures receiving a median of 20 observations per year (and some receiving more than 40).

- **Early Hiring with a High Bar**

Boston charter school leaders not only hire earlier—beginning as early as January—but they’ve also developed hiring processes that include more time for sample lessons and opportunities to identify teacher-school “fit,” compared to their peers across the country.

- **Right Responses to Good (and Bad) Performance**

High-performing teachers in Boston’s charter schools are nearly three times more likely than low-performing teachers to report that their school leader has identified leadership opportunities for them.

¹ National Center for Education Statistics (2013). *The Nation’s Report Card: A First Look: 2013 Mathematics and Reading Trial Urban District Assessment*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education; CREDO (2013). *Charter School Performance in Massachusetts*. Stanford: Center for Research on Education Outcomes; Cohodes, S., et al. (2013). *Charter School Demand and Effectiveness: A Boston Update*. Boston: The Boston Foundation & NewSchools Venture Fund.

² Average school proficiency percentages in Memphis, TN in spring of 2013 in literacy: 36% at top-performing schools (n=25), 22% at low-performing schools (n=19). Average school proficiency percentages in Memphis, TN in of spring 2013 in numeracy: 41% at top-performing schools (n=24), 25% at low-performing schools (n=19). Differences between groups are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ in both literacy and numeracy. Trends are similar using school growth data as well – schools with stronger instructional

culture see higher growth scores. A full technical appendix is available at www.tntp.org/greenhouse-schools-in-boston.

³ This study targeted Commonwealth Charter Schools operating in the city of Boston, of which 17 out of 26 opted to participate. The study also included two in-district charter schools in Boston run by UP Education Network, as well as three campuses in neighboring communities (Chelsea and Lynn), all of which are part

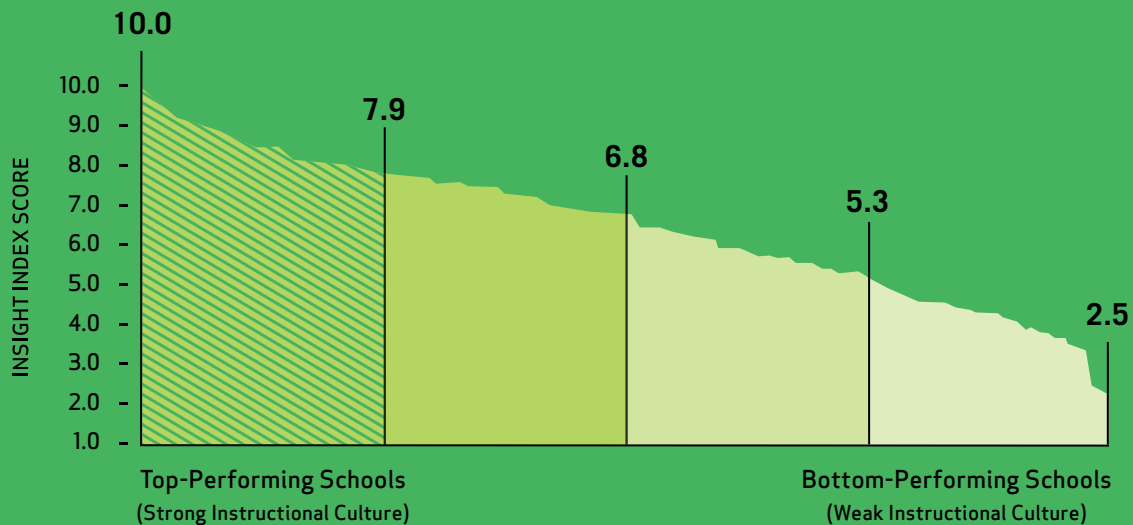
of larger charter networks in Boston. In addition, one of the participating Boston Commonwealth Charter Schools identified as two distinct campuses; therefore, for analysis purposes, there were 23 total schools included in the study. For the purposes of this report, the entire set of 23 will be referred to as “Boston charter schools” throughout. For more on the methodology behind this paper, a full technical appendix is available at www.tntp.org/greenhouse-schools-in-boston.

MEASURING INSTRUCTIONAL CULTURE

To better understand what school leaders can do to cultivate school environments where teachers and students flourish, we developed a diagnostic tool called Instructional Culture Insight, designed to survey teachers about their school environments: Do they feel, for example, that their schools have clear expectations for what successful classrooms look like? Do they have concrete goals for their students and support to measure progress toward those goals? What kind of feedback do they get on their teaching practices? The survey also asks about teachers' planned retention—how long do they intend to stay at their current school, and where do they plan to go after leaving?

We found, unsurprisingly, that some schools have stronger instructional cultures than others (*Figure 1*).

FIGURE 1 | NATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEYED CHARTER SCHOOLS, BY MEASURES OF INSTRUCTIONAL CULTURE



The Insight Index score provides a measure of how successfully a school's leaders are defining great teaching and putting in place the conditions to support it.

Since 2010, we've surveyed teachers in more than 250 charter schools and more than 850 district schools in more than 20 cities nationwide. Our national charter school data set includes significant portions of the charter schools operating in Washington, D.C., Memphis and Newark, as well as charter networks of various sizes in other cities across the country.

We've found a clear pattern: Positive responses to three statements in particular have a strong and consistent connection to the retention of high-performing teachers and to better student outcomes in reading and math. Those questions ask teachers how much they agree with the following statements:

"The expectations for effective teaching are clearly defined at my school."

"Teachers at my school share a common vision of what effective teaching looks like."

"My school is committed to improving my instructional practice."

Based on teachers' responses to those three statements, we are able to create a single, summative score to measure instructional culture—the "Insight Index"—for each school. The more teachers agreeing with each of the three questions, the higher a school's Index score.

Positive responses to three questions on the Instructional Culture Insight tool have a strong and consistent connection to the retention of high-performing teachers and to better student outcomes.

The Index is a useful tool for identifying schools with strong instructional cultures. But it doesn't tell us everything about the school-level practices that are enabling those successful cultures.

In *Greenhouse Schools*, we identified a broader set of practices that were consistent among the schools that performed higher than others on the Insight Index. In this paper, we'll explore how those same practices appear across a large segment of the Boston charter sector.



WHAT'S HAPPENING IN BOSTON?

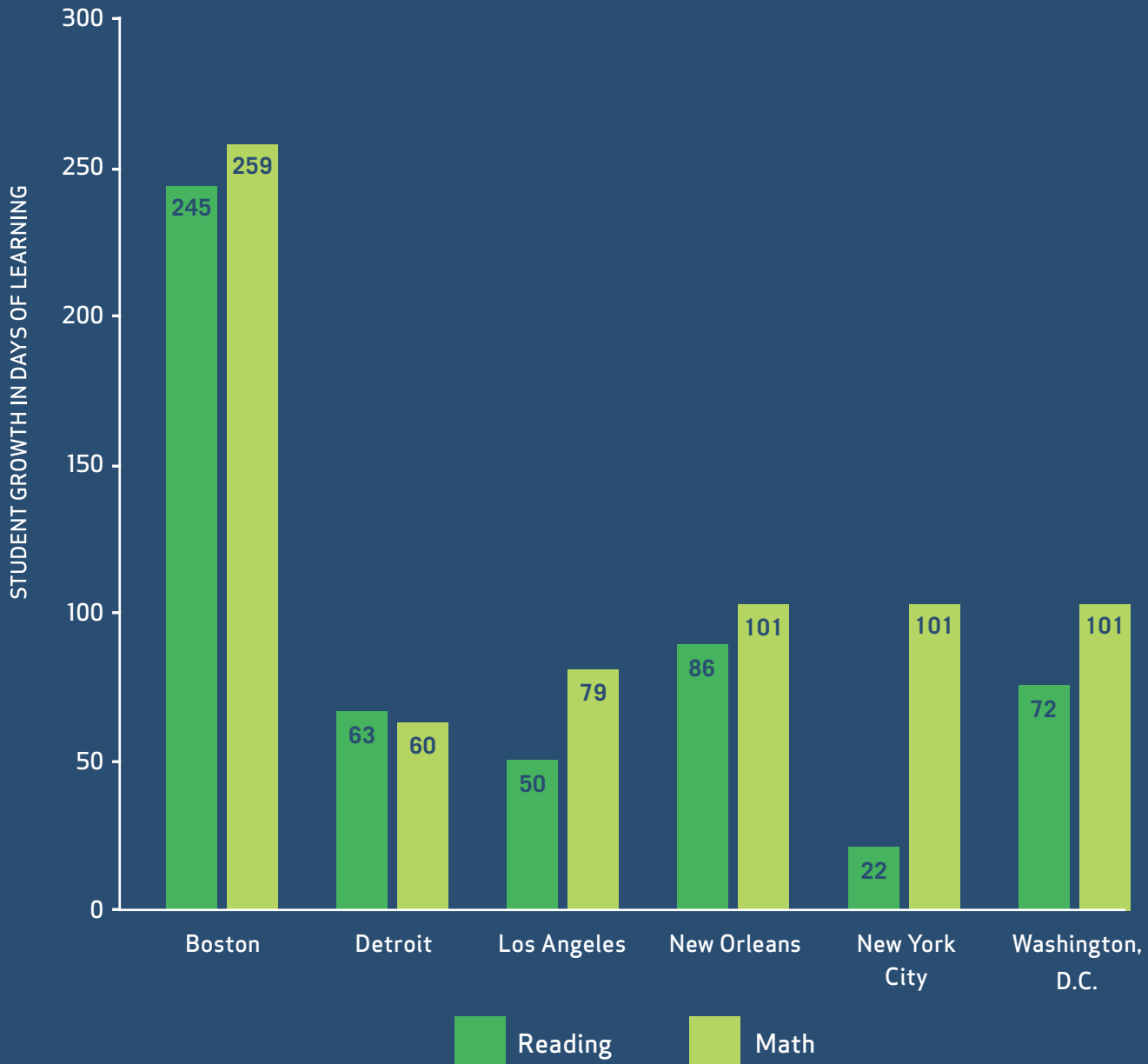
In the 2013-14 school year, 23 Boston charter schools⁴ participated in the Insight survey, allowing us to look closely at shared practices across a charter sector known for strong student outcomes (*Figure 2*).⁵ Participating schools have a similar range of student outcomes as those that opted not to participate.⁶

⁴ See footnote 3 for more detail on participation.

⁵ See footnote 1 for more detail on the performance of Boston's charter sector.

⁶ Average percent of students proficient in math and ELA: Participating Boston Commonwealth Charter Schools: 64% in math, 74% in ELA (n=12 schools with data); Commonwealth Charter Schools that opted out of the study: 65% in math, 73% in ELA 6 (n=5 schools with data). Student proficiency data is from the 2013-14 school year.

FIGURE 2 | AVERAGE DAYS OF LEARNING GAINED IN CHARTER SCHOOLS (COMPARED TO LOCAL DISTRICT SCHOOLS) FOR SIMILAR STUDENT POPULATIONS, BY CITY, 2007-2011



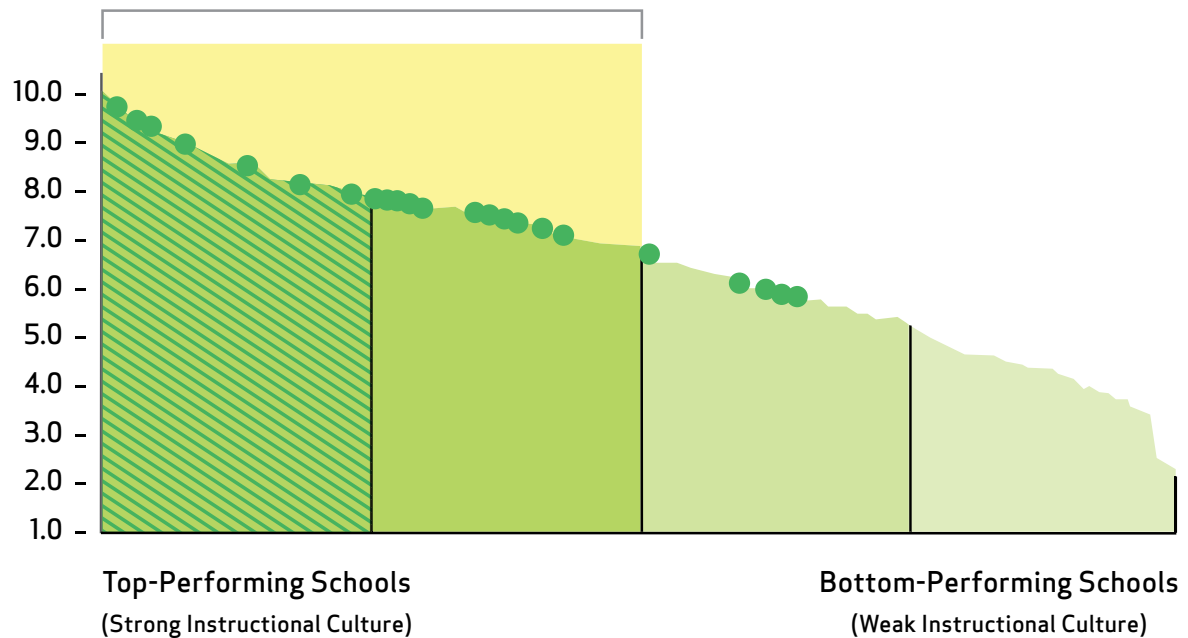
Boston charter schools outpace their charter sector peers in other cities when compared to their local districts—even though Boston Public Schools are among the highest performing urban public schools in the country.

When we look at how Boston charter schools perform on the Insight Index, we see a striking pattern: *All* the participating Boston charter schools—from those with the highest Insight Index scores (referred to as “top performers” throughout this paper) to those with the lowest scores—consistently demonstrate school leadership practices that place them in the top two-thirds of all participating charter schools nationally.⁷ In fact, a majority of participating Boston charter schools (18 out of 23) fall in the top half of all Insight Index scores nationally, and the

full range of Index scores for participating Boston charter schools is narrower than the range in other cities.⁸

The Boston charter schools we examined are not just high-performing in terms of student outcomes, in other words; they are high-performing in terms of putting in place the conditions for teachers to succeed (*Figure 3*). Put simply, Boston’s charter sector has a disproportionate number of greenhouse schools. Across the surveyed schools, school leaders are showcasing the key leadership practices that we’ve seen contribute to strong instructional cultures.

FIGURE 3 | DISTRIBUTION OF BOSTON CHARTER SCHOOLS RELATIVE TO NATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEYED CHARTER SCHOOLS, BY MEASURES OF INSTRUCTIONAL CULTURE



The majority of Boston’s participating charter schools fall in the top half of Insight Index scores for all surveyed charter schools nationally.

⁷ Of the 201 charter schools nationwide that participated in the Insight survey, all Insight Index scores in Boston fall within the top 132 schools.

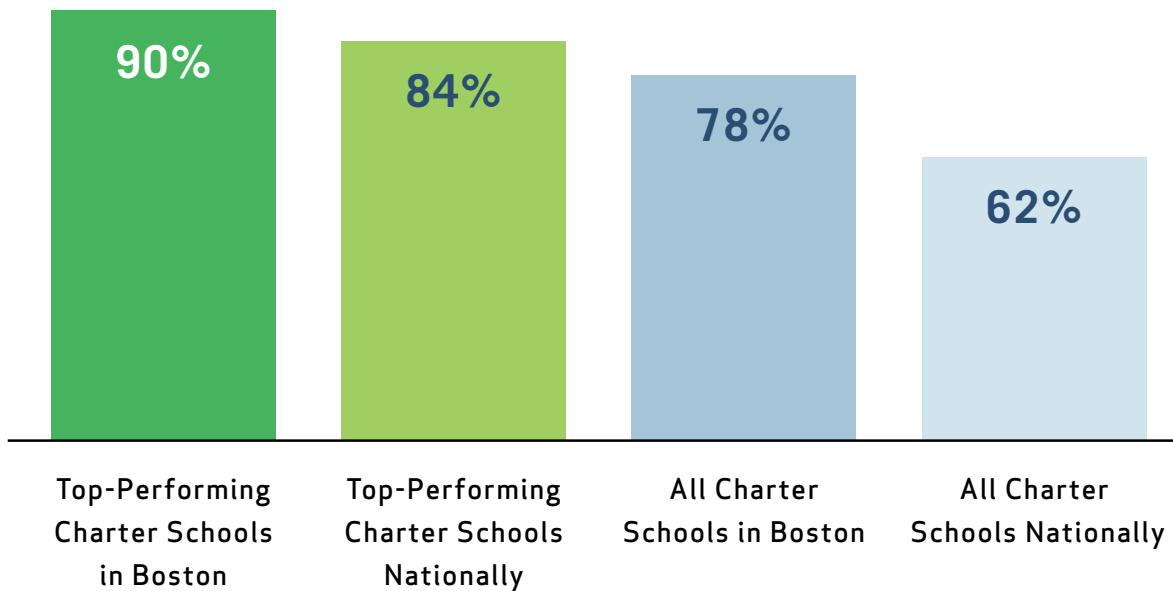
⁸ Index score ranges at key participating sites in the national dataset: Boston charter schools: 3.9 (n=23); Memphis charter schools: 5.4 (n=14); D.C. charter schools: 6.6 (n=73); Indianapolis charter schools: 6.7 (n=9).

Consider this: In terms of the school leadership practices that matter most to teachers, the *average* Boston charter school in our sample has more in common with a *top-performing* school⁹ in the national charter sector than it does with the national average. Asked if their school is a good place to teach and learn, for example, 78 percent of teachers across *all* the participating Boston schools agree—an agreement rate that’s comparable to just the top-performing charter schools nationwide (*Figure 4*).¹⁰

Critically, the Boston charter sector illustrates the ways that strong school culture results from the interaction of these

leadership practices: School leaders are thinking about how structures for smart hiring and teacher development connect to high expectations for behavior and academics, and how all those elements work together to foster environments that work well for students and teachers. Rebecca Cass, Managing Director of Programming for Excel Academy Charter Schools, explains: “Our systems and structure, coupled with high expectations and quality teaching, are the key levers for getting strong results for students.”

FIGURE 4 | TEACHERS AGREEING: “MY SCHOOL IS A GOOD PLACE TO TEACH AND LEARN.”



Teachers in the *average* Boston charter school report feeling roughly as positive about their school’s learning environment as teachers in top-performing charter schools nationally.

Note: “Top-Performing” refers to measures of school culture, using performance on the Instructional Culture Insight survey. All percentages refer to participating charter schools in Boston and nationwide.

⁹ “Top-performing” refers to measures of school culture throughout this paper. For the purposes of this paper, we have defined “top-performing” schools as those in the top 25 percent on the Insight Index.

¹⁰ Average school level percentage of teachers selecting “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statement, “My school is a good place to teach and learn.” Boston charter schools: 78% (n=23); national top-performing charter

schools: 84% (n=50). Difference between groups is not statistically significant.



GREENHOUSE PRACTICES IN BOSTON

CONSISTENT LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS
THAT ENABLE A FOCUS ON STUDENT GROWTH

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT THROUGH
OBSERVATION, FEEDBACK AND PEER MODELING

EARLY HIRING WITH A HIGH BAR

RIGHT RESPONSES TO GOOD (AND BAD)
PERFORMANCE

CONSISTENT LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS THAT ENABLE A FOCUS ON STUDENT GROWTH

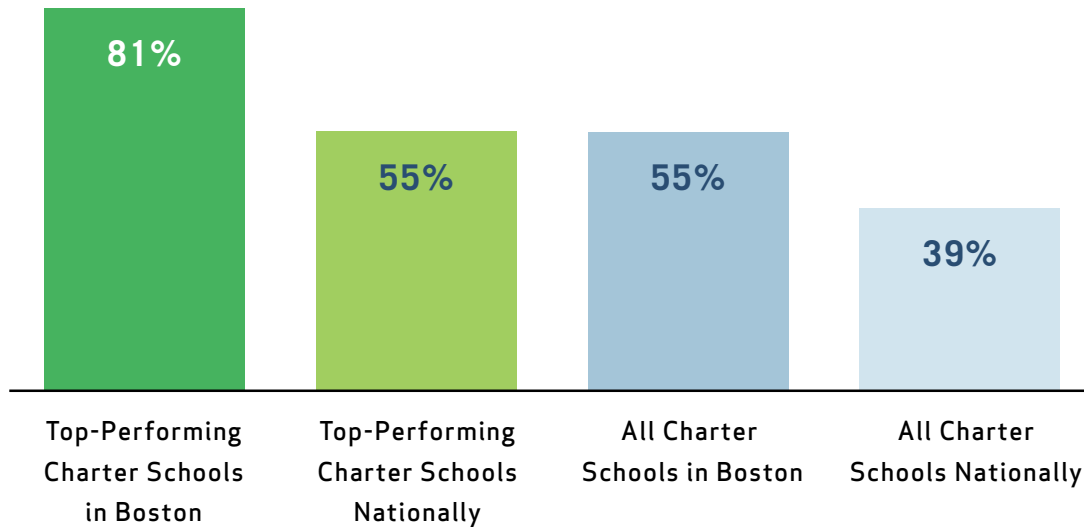
Learning Environment

Some of the strongest relationships between a school’s Insight results and student outcomes relate to the classroom and school learning environments.¹¹ In Boston, those relationships are on display: Schools with clear expectations for both teacher and student cultures allow everyone in the building to focus on teaching and learning.

Boston charter schools are at the top of the nation for maintaining strong, consistent learning environments. Nearly three-quarters of surveyed Boston teachers report that they feel supported by school leaders in addressing student behavior,¹² and that their school leaders promote

consistent expectations—on par with their peers in the top-performing charter schools nationwide (*Figure 5*).¹³ School leaders in the surveyed Boston schools set clear academic and behavioral expectations and exhibit an authentic commitment to those expectations, using clear communication with teachers, students and parents to ensure common understanding and consistent follow-through. These expectations are not rules for rules’ sake; rather, safe school environments with clear expectations are considered the foundation for learning, and a means to the ultimate end: growth for every student.

FIGURE 5 | TEACHERS AGREEING: “ACROSS MY SCHOOL, THERE ARE CONSISTENT EXPECTATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES FOR STUDENT BEHAVIOR.”



Top-performing Boston charter schools establish more consistent expectations for student behavior than other schools.

Note: “Top-Performing” refers to measures of school culture, using performance on the Instructional Culture Insight survey. All percentages refer to participating charter schools in Boston and nationwide.

¹¹ Boston charter schools with better learning environment domain scores also had higher student proficiency rates. Correlation of 0.45 in ELA and 0.53 in math (n=22); relationship is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ for both ELA and math. Due to data availability, student proficiency data is from 2013.

¹² Average school level percentage of teachers selecting “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statement, “School leaders consistently support me in addressing student misbehavior when I have exhausted my classroom consequences.” Boston charter schools: 72% (n=23).

¹³ Average school level percentage of teachers selecting “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statement, “Across my school, there are consistent expectations and consequences for student behavior.” Boston charter schools: 55% (n=23); national top-performing charter schools: 55%

(n=50). Difference between groups is not statistically significant.

Rigorous Expectations and Assessments

Schools that prioritize student outcomes start by setting high expectations, and they translate those expectations into measurable goals for every student. Strong learning environments enable a hallmark of greenhouse schools: a focus on student learning.

Nationally, nearly 90 percent of all teachers in greenhouse schools agree that their schools are holding students to a high bar.¹⁴ The Boston charter schools also take high academic standards seriously. In some cases, even a school's definition of passing is notably higher than it is elsewhere: Boston Collegiate Charter School, for example, defines the cutoff for passing a class as 70 percent—higher than the 65 or even 60 percent that is the standard in many other schools. Eighty-four percent of surveyed Boston teachers overall (and 99 percent in top-performing schools) agree that their school implements a rigorous curriculum,¹⁵ compared to only 67 percent of teachers at charter schools nationally (*Figure 6*). A large majority—more than three-quarters—report that teachers in their school track student progress toward measurable goals.¹⁶

To track student progress, teachers in Boston charter schools use rigorous formal and informal assessment tools—from quizzes and tests to exit slips and homework—to collect data that helps them adjust their instruction to meet students' needs. They also share more of these resources than their peers elsewhere: 73 percent of Boston charter teachers share assessments with those in the same content area, compared to only 62 percent of charter teachers nationally.¹⁷

Eighty-four percent of surveyed Boston teachers agree that their school implements a rigorous curriculum, compared to 67 percent of teachers at charter schools nationally.

For more on what this looks like in practice, read Case Study 1: Putting Student Growth First, on page 27.

¹⁴ Average school level percentage of teachers selecting "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statement, "My school implements a rigorous academic curriculum." National charter top-performing schools: 87% (n=50).

¹⁵ Average school level percentage of teachers selecting "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statement, "My school

implements a rigorous academic curriculum." Boston charter schools: 84% (n=23); national charter schools: 67% (n=201). Difference between groups is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

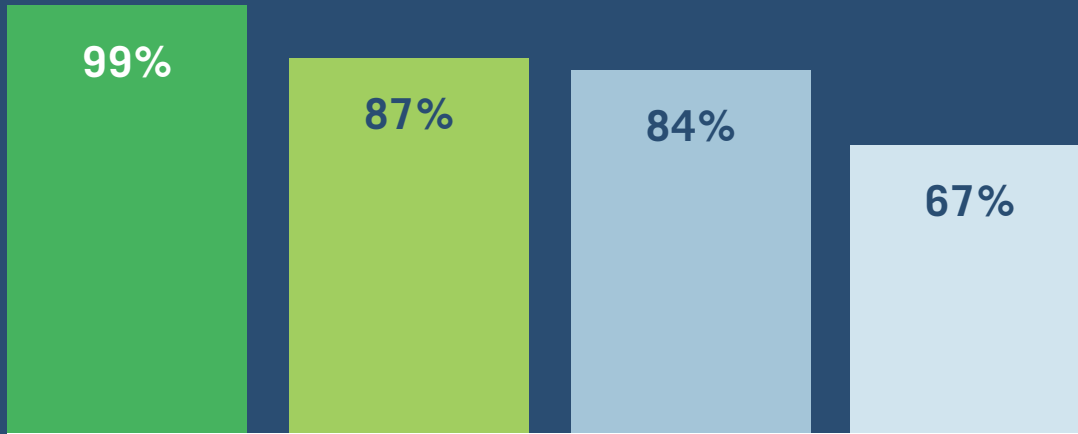
¹⁶ Average school level percentage of teachers selecting "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statement, "Teachers

at my school track the performance of their students toward measurable academic goals." Boston charter schools: 80% (n=23).

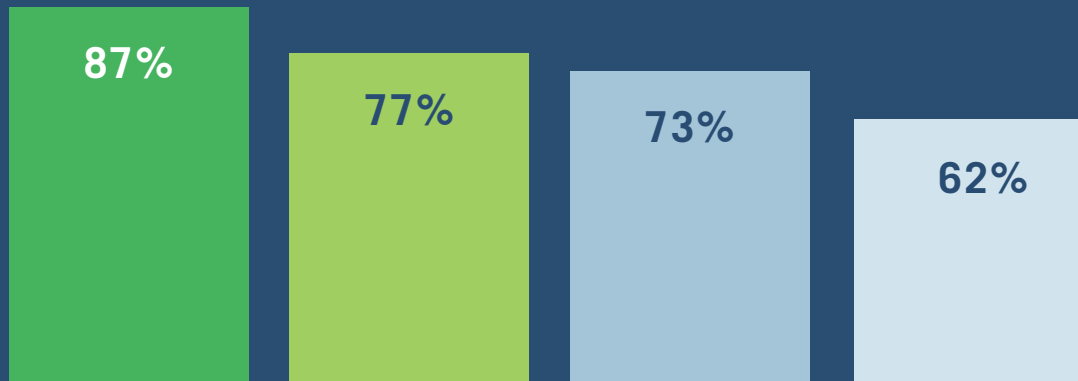
¹⁷ Average school level percentage of teachers selecting "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statement, "Teachers of the same content area at my school share a common set of rigorous interim

assessments that ensure students are ready for college." Boston charter schools: 73% (n=23); national charter schools: 62% (n=201). Difference between groups is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

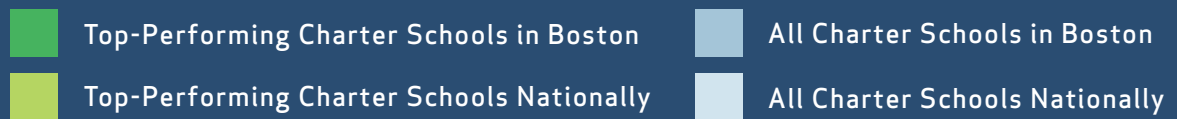
FIGURE 6 | TEACHERS AGREEING WITH STATEMENTS ON THEIR SCHOOL'S CULTURE



My school implements a rigorous academic curriculum.



Teachers of the same content area at my school share a common set of rigorous interim assessments that ensure students are ready for college.



Boston charter schools institute a rigorous curriculum and share content and practices within the school.

Note: “Top-Performing” refers to measures of school culture, using performance on the Instructional Culture Insight survey. All percentages refer to participating charter schools in Boston and nationwide.

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT THROUGH OBSERVATION, FEEDBACK AND PEER MODELING

For teachers to help students grow, they must work with school leaders and colleagues who also support their growth as practitioners. Given the complexity of excellent teaching, improving the quality of instruction across a school requires school leaders to start from their teachers' strengths, weaknesses and unique classroom contexts, and build teacher skills from there.

Nearly 80 percent of Boston teachers we surveyed feel that their school is committed to improving their instructional practice, compared to only 66 percent of teachers elsewhere (Figure 7).¹⁸ On the whole, teachers we surveyed in Boston report that they find value in regular, actionable feedback from their administrators, transparent evaluation tools and structured time for collaborating with and learning from effective colleagues. Compared to their counterparts nationwide, they report working in school environments that are richer than average with meaningful growth opportunities like these.

Observations and Feedback

In greenhouse schools, school leaders act as more than just building managers—they're true instructional leaders who ensure more frequent classroom observations than leaders in lower performing schools and provide teachers with regular feedback on their performance.

Compared to their peers nationally, the Boston charter school teachers we surveyed have more frequent touchpoints with their school leaders—a median of 18 observations throughout the year, compared to 11

elsewhere (Figure 7).¹⁹ Nearly three-quarters of surveyed Boston teachers say that feedback from observations helps them improve student outcomes.²⁰ At Neighborhood House, one teacher stated, “The most effective professional development I’ve received has been in the form of one-on-one coaching.”

Though observations can take up a lot of time for school leaders, they are critical for providing teachers with a clear sense of instructional expectations and support. More than three-quarters of teachers who were observed 31-40 times in a year reported that they received enough feedback on their instructional practice, compared to only 43 percent of those who received 20 or fewer observations.²¹

To put those numbers in context, ten observations translates to an average of one observation per calendar month throughout the school year, while 40 observations means teachers are observed—and have the opportunity for feedback—more than once a week.

But increasing teachers' opportunities for feedback isn't enough to ensure *quality* feedback that translates to changes in their practice. The participating Boston charter schools offer some detail on the kinds of feedback that teachers find useful: First and foremost, school leaders in Boston are focused on feedback that digs deep on one specific goal at a time. At KIPP, a teacher described her most effective professional development experiences as the “weekly individual meetings with my coach, who give[s] me one *specific* thing to work on.”

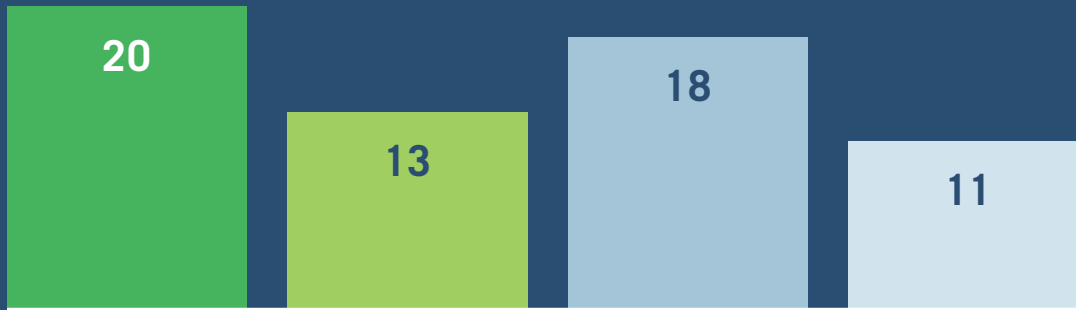
¹⁸ Average school level percentage of teachers selecting “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statement, “My school is committed to improving my instructional practice.” Boston charter schools: 79% (n=23); National charter schools: 66% (n=201). Difference between groups is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

¹⁹ Median number of observations teachers report receiving at their school. Boston charter schools: 18 (n=23); national charter schools: 11 (n=201). Difference between groups is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

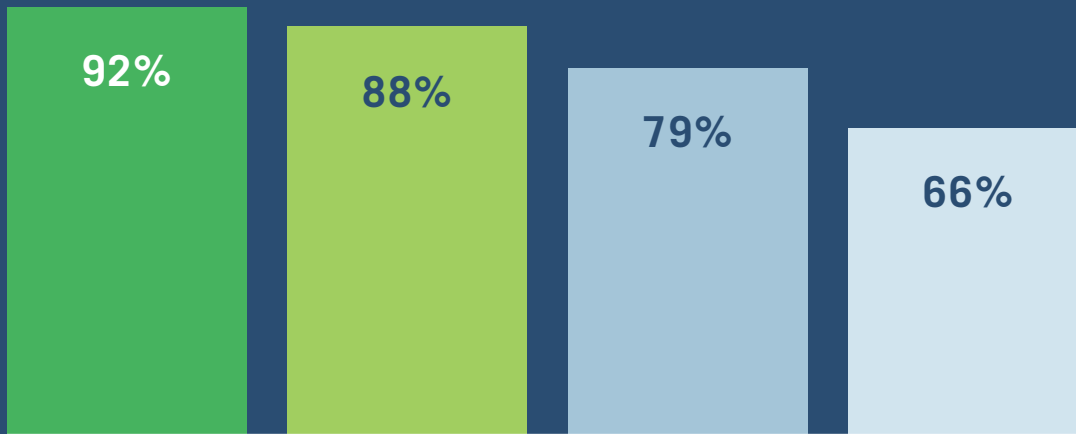
²⁰ Average school level percentage of teachers selecting “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statement, “The feedback I get from being observed helps me improve student outcomes.” Boston charter schools: 72% (n=23).

²¹ Percentage of teachers selecting “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statement, “I get enough feedback on my instructional practice.” Teachers who self-reported that they were observed 20 or fewer times: 43% (n=263 teachers); teachers who self-reported that they were observed 31 through 40 times: 76% (n=42 teachers). Difference between groups is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

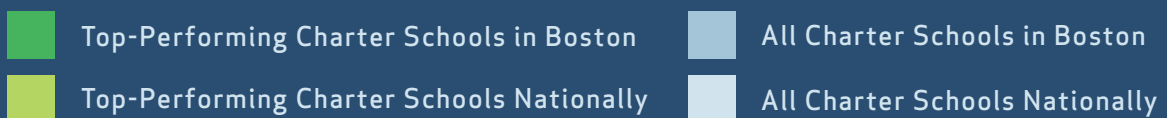
FIGURE 7 | TEACHERS REPORTING CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS AND COMMITMENT TO INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE



Median number of observations received, as reported by teachers.



Teachers agreeing: “My school is committed to improving my instructional practice.”



Boston charter schools consistently ensure that teachers receive opportunities for meaningful feedback and mentoring.

Note: “Top-Performing” refers to measures of school culture, using performance on the Instructional Culture Insight survey. All percentages refer to participating charter schools in Boston and nationwide.

Exemplary Peers

Teachers are also more likely to feel that their school is committed to improving their instructional practice if they feel surrounded by many teachers who set an example of what highly effective teaching looks like.²² More effective colleagues offer more opportunities to see effective teaching in practice. At schools where professional development includes demonstrations of effective teaching, teachers are more likely to report that they learn new skills to implement in their own classrooms.²³

Surveyed Boston teachers consistently speak to the importance of effective teachers at their school in improving their own instructional practices (*Figure 8*). A teacher from Brooke Mattapan stated that the best professional development involved “watching best practices of teachers...pertaining to classroom culture.”

But not all teacher collaboration and observation time is equally useful. Teachers consistently report that learning from their *effective* colleagues—either by watching them in action, planning alongside them or hearing from them about best practices—is hugely helpful. To make collaboration a productive use of teachers’ limited time, it

should be structured around improving specific elements of practice by involving peers with those strengths. At Brooke Roslindale, for example, teachers used to be assigned randomly to observation partners, peers who would observe each other and share feedback. But this year, the school has shifted to a model where teachers are directed to observe specific colleagues who are exceptional in areas where the observing teacher is trying to improve.

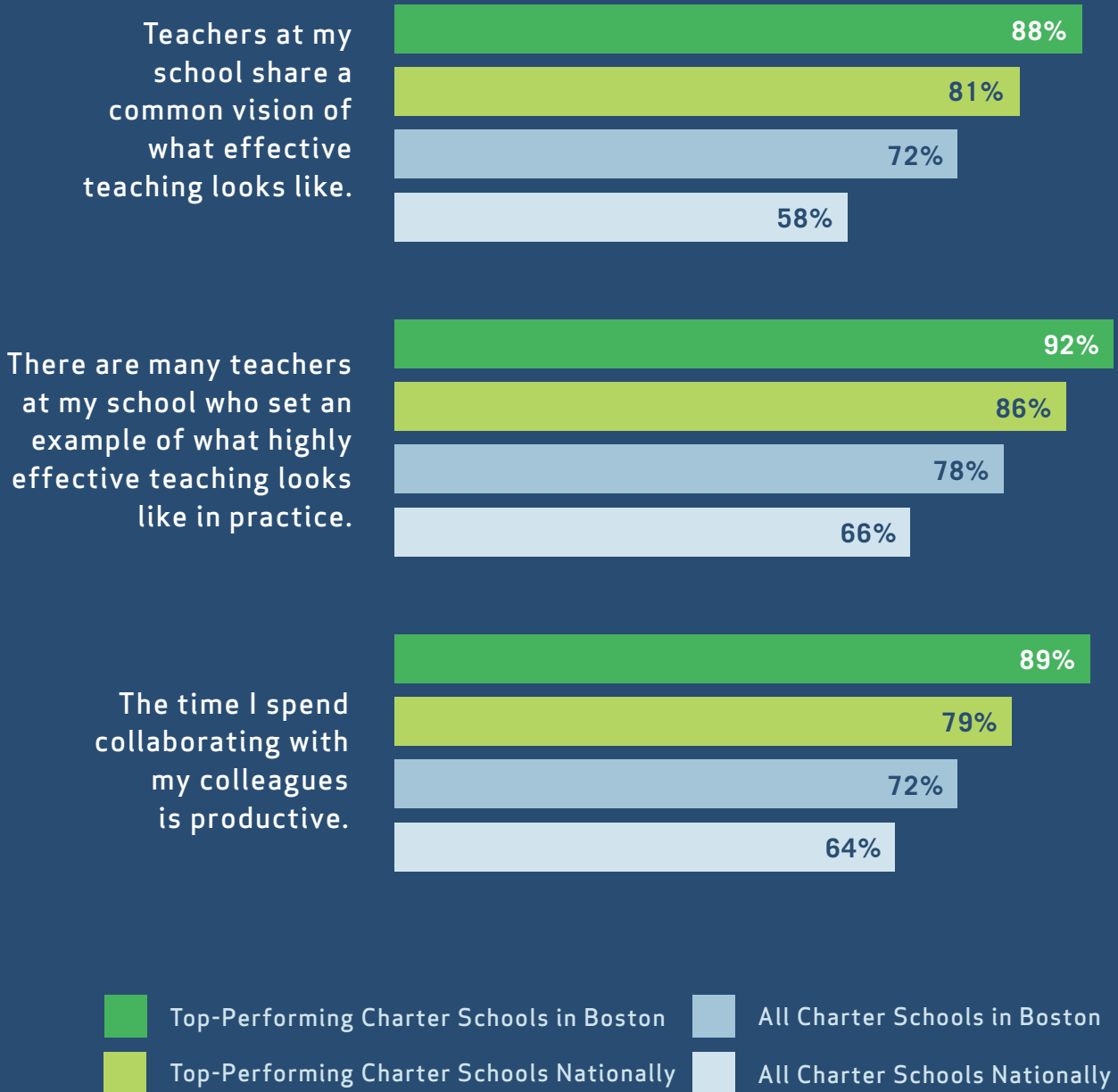
Ultimately, at greenhouse schools, teacher development is viewed holistically, as the central lever in school improvement. Teacher development is embedded in the Boston charter schools’ day-to-day structures and viewed as directly related to student outcomes. While capturing data that connects professional development to student outcomes can be tricky, Sarah Lynch, Principal of Roxbury Prep Lucy Stone, explains, “If what we’re doing for teachers isn’t affecting student outcomes, we shouldn’t do it.”

For more on what this looks like in practice, read Case Study 2: Teacher Development Never Stops, on page 30.

²² Boston school level correlation between agreement rates with the statements, “There are many teachers at my school who set an example for me of what highly effective teaching looks like in practice” and “My school is committed to improving my instructional practice”: 0.47 (n=23). Correlation is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

²³ Boston school level correlation between agreement rates with the statements, “Professional development opportunities at your school include demonstrations (either live or in video) of what effective teaching looks like in practice” and “In the past six months, I have learned new skills that I was able to immediately use in my own classroom”: 0.53 (n=23). Correlation is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

FIGURE 8 | TEACHERS AGREEING WITH STATEMENTS ON COLLABORATION WITH PEERS



Boston charter schools provide time and resources for teachers to collaborate with their effective peers.

Note: “Top-Performing” refers to measures of school culture, using performance on the Instructional Culture Insight survey. All percentages refer to participating charter schools in Boston and nationwide.

LET'S GO TO THE TAPE

With the increasing ease of capturing and sharing video footage, several Boston charter schools are taking advantage of this medium to make great teaching visible and to provide teachers with another way to explore and improve their practice. Video access may make feedback from school leaders even more productive for teachers, as they're able to match the feedback to a record of their work and develop a keener understanding of what they should continue doing or could do differently. At KIPP Boston, one teacher identified her most effective professional development activity as "watching video of myself and receiving feedback, then practicing the moment again to improve my directions and responses to students."

The principals of Brooke Roslindale and Roxbury Prep Lucy Stone carry cameras or tablets everywhere

they go, and they speak to the value of being able to capture something good as it's happening. At Brooke Roslindale, Principal Meghan Thornton sends out weekly video blasts with clips of great teaching. Both schools maintain large online video libraries where teachers can access footage of particular instructional skills in action.

At Lucy Stone, video is also a way to put some of the onus for teacher development on teachers themselves. Teachers cut their own video for observation debriefs: They're asked to identify something they're doing well and find evidence for it (which can then be shared with others struggling with similar skills). This approach requires teachers to know what "doing well" looks like, Principal Sarah Lynch explains.

EARLY HIRING WITH A HIGH BAR

In addition to developing their current teachers, it is vital that school leaders attract and hire the best possible new teachers to ensure that they build outstanding teaching teams that can meet their high expectations for instruction. At Boston Collegiate Charter School, Chief Academic Officer Jenna Ogundipe explained—after detailing her school’s high expectations and comprehensive system for data collection and analysis—that “all of these systems fall into place when you have the right people.”

Early Hiring

We’ve been documenting the detrimental effects of late teacher hiring for more than a decade. In 2003, we looked at the hiring processes in four large urban school districts across the country, and found that late hiring timelines caused large numbers of teacher candidates—particularly those in high-need, hard-to-staff subject areas—to drop out of the process.²⁴

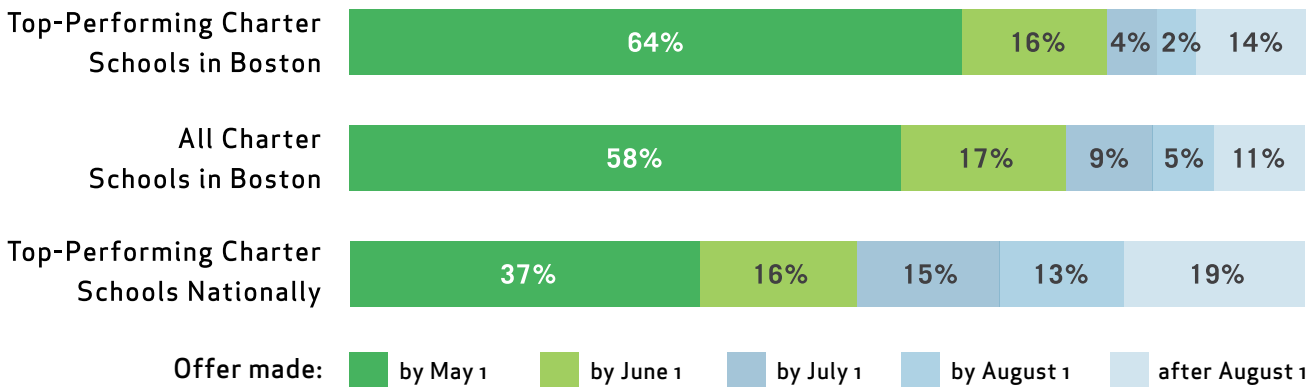
The teachers lost to late hiring timelines tended to be higher performing, too: Top teachers, given more job

opportunities, tended to drop out of contention for positions in districts with late hiring timelines.

Schools with the strongest hiring practices conclude as much of their hiring as possible by *March*.

Boston’s charter sector is consistently outperforming the national sector in terms of securing teachers early. Nearly three-quarters of newly hired Boston teachers in the participating charter schools received their offers by June 1, compared to only about 50 percent in the top charter schools nationally (*Figure 9*).²⁵ In interviews with school leaders in Boston, we learned that the schools with the strongest hiring practices actually conclude as much of their hiring as possible by *March*. While the race really picks up in January, these schools consider hiring as a year-round endeavor.

FIGURE 9 | PERCENT OF HIRES OFFERED THEIR POSITION, BY MONTH



Even the average Boston charter school hires substantially earlier than top-performing charter schools nationally.

Note: “Top-Performing” refers to measures of school culture, using performance on the Instructional Culture Insight survey. All percentages refer to participating charter schools in Boston and nationwide.

²⁴ TNTP (2003). *Missed Opportunities: How We Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms*. Brooklyn, NY: TNTP.

2012-13 or 2013-14 school years reporting that they received an offer for their current teaching position by June 1: Boston charter schools: 74% (n=23); national charter schools: 53% at top-performing schools (n=41); 47% overall (n=155). Differences between

Boston charter schools and national top-performing charter schools and Boston charter schools and all national charter schools are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$. Hiring numbers only include schools with a minimum of 3 new hires. It’s also worth noting

that in the 2013-14 school year (hiring for 2014-15), Boston Public Schools made an important policy shift toward early hiring, which could affect local charter school hiring in years to come, but the data in this report pre-date that change.

²⁵ Average school level percentage of teachers hired for the start of the

Rigorous Hiring

Hiring early is a great start for school leaders who want to ensure that their classrooms are led by the best possible teachers, but an earlier hiring timeline alone isn't enough. Strong school leaders know that a teacher who may excel in one school environment might not be the right match for another. A hiring process that is built to hold teacher candidates to a high bar and ensure appropriate fit is critical for building school cultures that put great teaching first.

A hiring process that is built to hold teacher candidates to a high bar and ensure appropriate fit is critical for building school cultures that put great teaching first.

Compared to their counterparts nationally, more new hires in Boston charter schools report having taught a sample lesson as part of the hiring process, and the majority

of those teachers received feedback on their lessons.²⁶ More teacher candidates in Boston charter schools also had opportunities to speak with current teachers at their prospective schools and to co-plan with prospective colleagues than teachers elsewhere—helping to ensure that new hires are a good fit for a school's existing culture, and vice versa (*Figure 10*).²⁷

By watching teacher candidates in action in a classroom, and by connecting candidates to current teachers for informal conversations, school leaders are able to get a fuller picture of a candidate before making an offer. And new teachers can gather more information about their potential fit with a school before accepting any offers—which helps ensure that teachers are aligned with the school's mission and strategy, and are able to be part of the solution for students from day one.

For more on what this looks like in practice, read Case Study 3: It's All About the Right People, on page 32.

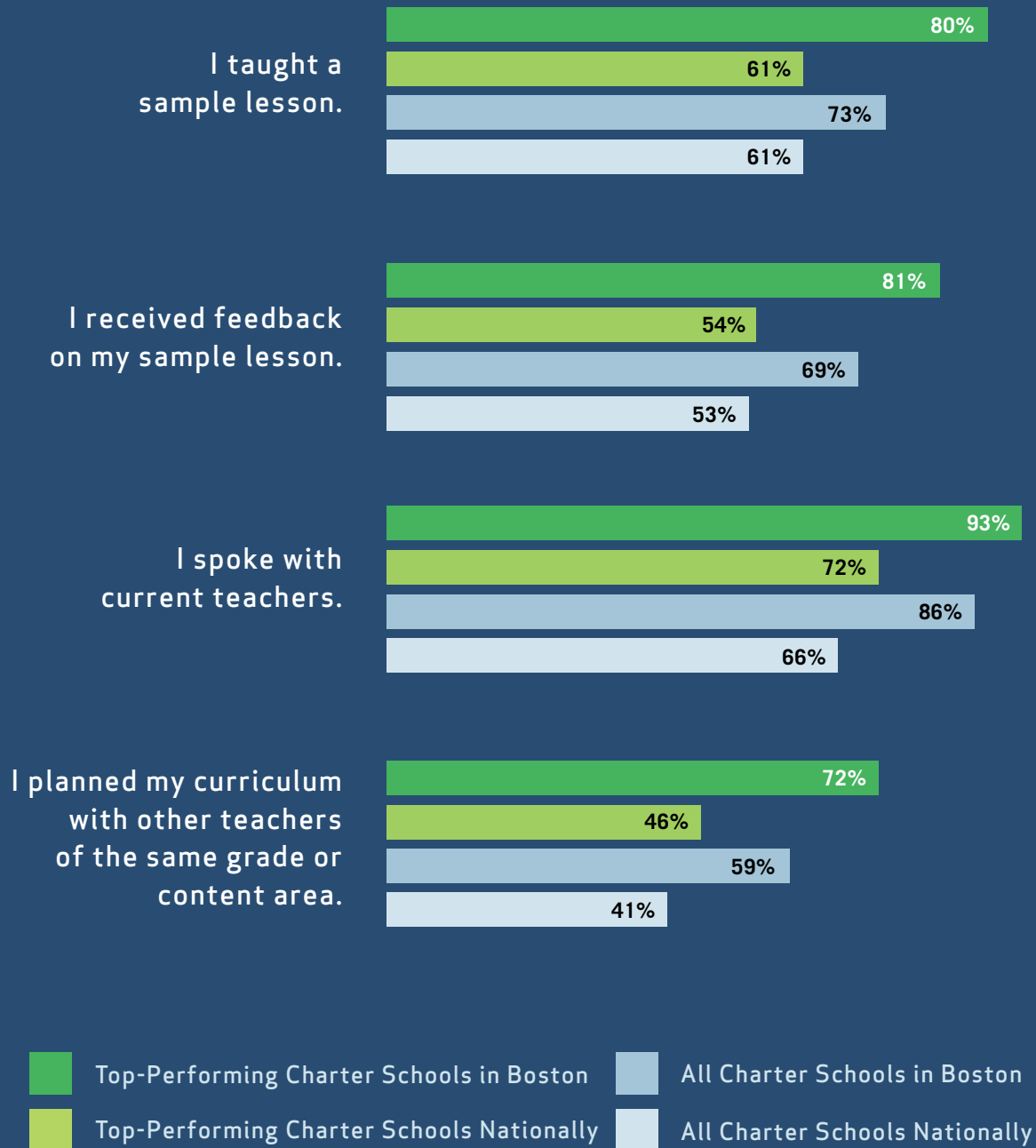
²⁶ Average school level percentage of teachers hired for the start of the 2012-13 or 2013-14 school years that checked "As part of my school interview process, I taught a sample lesson." Boston charter schools: 73% (n=23); national charter schools: 61% (n=155). Difference between groups is statistically significant at $p < 0.1$.

Average school level percentage of new hires that checked, "As part of my school interview process, I received feedback on my sample lesson." Boston charter schools: 69%; national charter schools: 53%. Difference between groups is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. Hiring numbers only include schools with a minimum of 3 new hires.

²⁷ Average school level percentage of teachers hired for the start of the 2012-13 or 2013-14 school years who checked, "Before I started school, I spoke with current teachers." Boston charter schools: 86% (n=23); national charter schools: 66% (n=155). Average school level percentage of new hires who checked, "Before I started

school, I planned my curriculum with other teachers of the same grade or content area." Boston charter schools: 59%; national charter schools: 41%. Differences between groups are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$ for both questions. Hiring numbers only include schools with a minimum of 3 new hires.

FIGURE 10 | TEACHERS AGREEING WITH STATEMENTS ON HIRING AND ORIENTATION



Boston charter schools consistently seek a good fit between teachers and schools by creating a rigorous, strategic hiring process.

Note: “Top-Performing” refers to measures of school culture, using performance on the Instructional Culture Insight survey. All percentages refer to participating charter schools in Boston and nationwide.

THE RETENTION CHALLENGE

The one area where the Boston charter schools do not outperform their peers nationally is on teacher retention; the Boston charter sector's average for teacher turnover is on par with other cities where charter schools participate in Insight.

But retention is an area where outside-of-school factors can influence the overall level of teacher turnover, which can make cross-regional comparisons difficult to interpret. For example, local labor markets and employment opportunities look very different in Washington, D.C. than they do in Newark, making it more difficult to pinpoint the school-based influences that are most relevant to teachers' decisions to stay or leave a school.

As a result, we see great variation in teacher retention nationwide. *The Irreplaceables*, our 2012 report on teacher retention in urban schools, provides a good example: Across five large urban districts, we saw overall annual turnover rates ranging from 10 percent to 34 percent, with all districts retaining their best and worst teachers at strikingly similar rates. This

variation also comes across in Insight data: Urban districts that participate in Insight see average levels of planned attrition ranging from 13 to 19 percent, and participating charter sectors have average levels of planned attrition ranging from 11 to 34 percent.²⁸

Despite regional differences, within a local area, schools with strong instructional cultures retain far more of their most effective teachers. In fact, schools with weak cultures stand to lose their effective teachers at 1.5 times the rate as schools with stronger cultures.²⁹ Furthermore, teachers leave schools with strong cultures for fundamentally different reasons than teachers leaving schools with weak cultures.³⁰

We see this pattern in Boston. At the schools with the strongest instructional cultures, 31 percent of effective teachers are planning to leave in the next two years, while at schools with the weakest cultures, 45 percent plan to leave in the same time frame. And teachers refer to different reasons for leaving schools in Boston than do their counterparts in other

²⁸ Percent of teachers who responded "0 - this is my last year" to the question, "Not including this year, how many years do you plan to keep working as a full-time teacher at your current school?" 11%-20%: 4 charter sectors, 4 districts; 21%-30%: 4 charter sectors; 31%+: 1 charter sector. Numbers only include non-specialized districts or charter sectors with a minimum of 5 participating schools.

²⁹ Average school level percentage of effective teachers at national charter schools selecting that they plan to leave their school in the next two years: Top-performing schools: 34% (n=44); bottom-performing schools: 50% (n=37). Includes only schools with a minimum of 4 effective teachers. Difference between groups is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

³⁰ Average percentage of teachers at national charter schools selecting that they plan to leave their school due to reasons unrelated to their school: Top-performing schools: 38% (n=537 teachers); bottom-performing schools: 21% (n=640 teachers). Average percentage of teachers at national charter schools selecting that they plan to leave their school

due to dissatisfaction with culture and learning environment at their school: Top-performing schools: 3%; bottom-performing schools: 18%. Differences between group responses to the question, "Please select the most important factor contributing to your plans to stop teaching at your school" are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

cities: While 21 percent of teachers in the national charter data set cite dissatisfaction with student conduct, school culture, learning environment or school leadership as their primary reason for leaving their school, only 8 percent of teachers in Boston plan to leave for the same reasons. Forty-one percent of teachers cite “personal or professional reasons unrelated to my school” as their reason for leaving, compared to 32 percent of teachers in the national charter data set.³¹

The data on teacher retention in Boston’s charter sector also raise interesting questions about the effect of attrition on overall school culture, and what school leaders can do to mitigate that effect. Nationally, surveyed charter schools with the highest rates of planned teacher retention average an Insight Index score of 7.5 (out of 10), while Boston’s average Index score is 7.6.³² So while the participating Boston charter schools experience teacher attrition on par with the national average, their overall school culture remains slightly stronger than schools with even

the highest retention rates. In other words, the data suggest that there may be other school leadership practices—from establishing consistent expectations to creating frequent opportunities for meaningful feedback—that can offset the effect of high attrition on school culture, perhaps by helping to bring newly hired teachers up to speed more quickly and strategically than in schools with weaker leadership.

Nonetheless, as we highlighted in *The Irreplaceables*, keeping the best teachers in the classroom pays tremendous dividends for students, and like other charter schools nationally, the Boston charter sector can and should do more to retain more of their best. Too few great teachers are the focus of specific retention efforts, and school leaders in several Boston networks are rightly developing career ladders, leadership opportunities and work/life balance strategies that may help keep their best teachers in the classroom. Doing so will allow Boston charter schools to be even more effective for the students they serve.

³¹ Average percentage of teachers selecting that they plan to leave their school due to reasons unrelated to their school: Boston charter schools: 41% (n=287 teachers); national charter schools: 32% (n=2,373 teachers). Difference between groups is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

³² Schools with the highest rates of planned teacher retention are defined as those in the top 25 percent of teacher planned retention over the next two years.

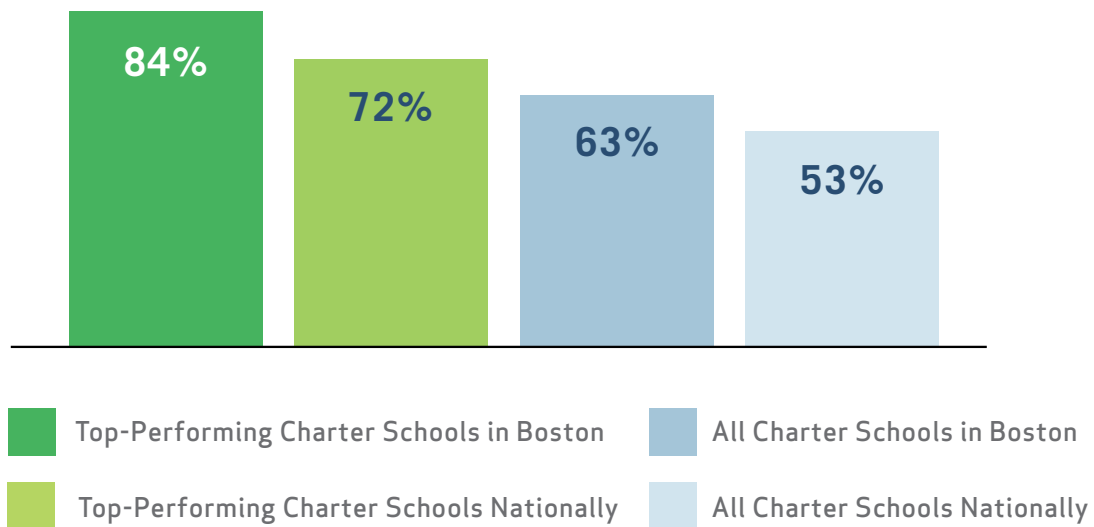
RIGHT RESPONSES TO GOOD (AND BAD) PERFORMANCE

Teaching has, for too long, been viewed as a profession with a high tolerance for mediocrity. To shift this perception, school leaders need to differentiate between their low- and high-performers and offer different kinds of recognition and opportunities to each group. In *The Irreplaceables* (2012), we found that in three out of four districts, retention rates of effective teachers were higher in schools where teachers reported a low tolerance for poor teaching. In other words, great teachers want to work in schools with other great teachers—and they’re more likely to stay in schools where school leaders hold all teachers to a high bar.

The Insight survey provides evidence that teachers in participating Boston charter schools feel that their schools value great teaching and have little tolerance for poor performance—more so than their peers in charter schools elsewhere (*Figure 11*).³³

Boston charter school leaders are particularly intentional about the actions they take to elevate their best teachers. In Boston, high-performing teachers in the participating charter schools were identified for leadership opportunities at nearly three times the rate of lower performers, and more

FIGURE 11 | TEACHERS AGREEING: “THERE IS LOW TOLERANCE FOR INEFFECTIVE TEACHING AT MY SCHOOL.”



Note: “Top-Performing” refers to measures of school culture, using performance on the Instructional Culture Insight survey. All percentages refer to participating charter schools in Boston and nationwide.

Boston charter schools hold a high bar for great teaching.

³³ Average school level percentage of teachers selecting “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statement, “There is a low tolerance for ineffective teaching at my school.” Boston charter schools: 63%

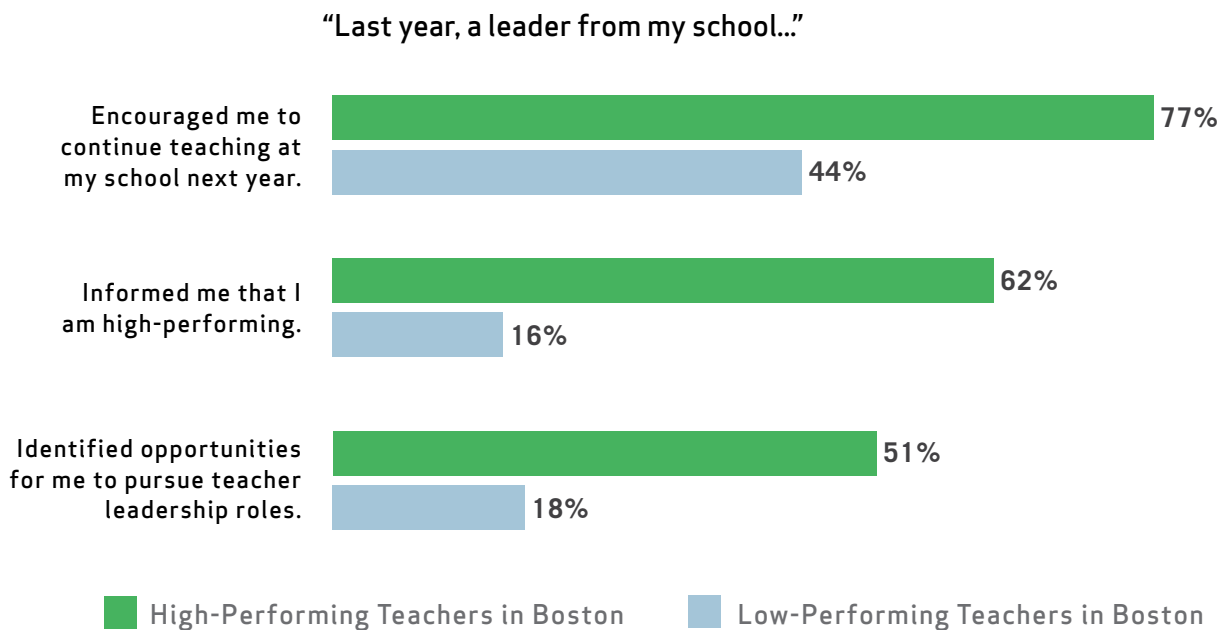
(n=23); national charter schools: 53% (n=201). Difference between groups is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

than three-quarters of effective teachers were encouraged to remain at their schools (*Figure 12*).³⁴ High-performing teachers in these schools are tapped as leaders who can support new and developing colleagues. They're also regularly called on to model great instructional practice and are the focus of retention efforts. In some charter networks, such as Brooke Charter Schools, high-performing teachers have opportunities to gain responsibility and influence while remaining in the classroom.

identify high- and low-performing teachers for leadership opportunities at approximately equal rates (if anything, in fact, principals may actually offer more leadership opportunities to low-performing teachers).³⁵ With their deliberate focus on their top teachers for leadership opportunities and retention efforts, school leaders in the surveyed Boston charter schools cultivate school cultures that are driven by teachers' needs and priorities, and that make great teaching the central, visible priority school-wide.

This is a stark contrast to both charter and district schools nationally. Our research shows that principals tend to

FIGURE 12 | BOSTON CHARTER SCHOOL TEACHERS AGREEING WITH STATEMENTS ON RETENTION, BY TEACHER PERFORMANCE



Boston charter schools differentiate between high-performing and low-performing teachers.

³⁴ Average school level percentage of teachers at Boston charter schools that checked, “Last year, someone from my school leadership team identified opportunities for me to pursue teacher leadership roles.” Effective teachers: 51% (n=23 schools); ineffective

teachers: 18% (n=7 schools). Average school level percentage of Boston teachers that checked, “Last year, someone at my school encouraged me to continue teaching at my school next year.” Effective teachers: 77% (n=23 schools); ineffective teachers: 44%

(n=7 schools). Differences between effective and ineffective teacher response are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$ for both questions. See technical appendix at www.tntp.org/greenhouse-schools-in-boston for

additional detail on high- and low-performing teachers.

³⁵ TNTP (2012). *The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America's Urban Schools*. Brooklyn, NY: TNTP.

GROWING A GREENHOUSE SECTOR

We think school and network leaders across the country can replicate Boston's successful school environments by focusing on a few key strategies:

Establish a safe environment that focuses on student growth.

A strong team culture among teachers and high expectations for both adults and students can lay the groundwork for great teaching and learning. By setting clear expectations for students at the start of the year, and thoughtfully communicating those expectations to teachers, students and parents to ensure consistent buy-in and follow-through, school leaders can free up teachers to focus on student growth. Measurable goals for each student and a supportive data collection/review/reteach process can help teachers propel their students toward better outcomes.

Prioritize developing teachers by providing regular, actionable feedback.

First and foremost, school leaders must define their expectations for excellent instruction and make that level of instruction highly visible throughout the school. Then, teachers must receive regular feedback that pushes them toward meeting that bar. School leaders can and should involve other members of their leadership teams in conducting observations so that teachers receive more actionable feedback, more regularly. Experimenting with the use of video technology, where possible, is another way to offer teachers more useful feedback on their practice while balancing the time demands on administrators.

Hire earlier and with a careful eye toward skill and fit.

An earlier, more rigorous hiring process is helping many of Boston's schools attract top teachers. To shift hiring timelines successfully, school leaders should prioritize getting a sense of their potential vacancies early in the school year, by building honest relationships with teachers and putting in place a system that supports teachers to be up front about their career plans. With an earlier timeline in place, school leaders can build time into the hiring process for sample lessons and frank conversations about school culture, which can help ensure that they hire teachers who are a good fit for their schools.

Identify and celebrate effective teachers.

Using great teachers as mentors and exemplars can free up school leaders and provide teachers with a valuable teacher-to-teacher perspective on best practices. By differentiating between their high-performing and low-performing teachers when offering leadership opportunities or other retention efforts, school leaders can encourage their top teachers to stay—which can in turn bolster instructional culture, as these teachers model strong instruction and serve as leaders of school culture.

For more on how school leaders in Boston's charter schools are tackling these issues in practice, see the case studies starting on page 26.

CONCLUSION

The practices on display in Boston charter schools aren't revolutionary relative to the school improvement priorities of the last decade. Boston's school leaders are putting student outcomes first and are using measurable goals and rigorous curricula to help meet them; they're focusing on support and feedback to help teachers improve; and they're finding ways to build school environments that value excellent instruction and leverage their top teachers as leaders. That's the hard work behind any school that succeeds for kids. But something different is happening in Boston, too, to allow the entire sector to perform, on average, better for teachers and for students than other charter sectors nationwide.

Certainly, the Boston charter sector enjoys particular advantages: As a small city with a highly educated workforce and many universities from which to draw ambitious young graduates into teaching careers, Boston has a labor market that works in favor of the charter sector (although it also presents unique retention challenges, as we've seen). The education community in Boston is vibrant and well-connected, with multiple non-profits with strong local presences that make Boston a rich city for education innovation and collaboration.

But these factors alone can't fully explain the pattern of excellence in Boston's charter sector. When we look at measures of instructional culture in a majority of Boston's charter schools, their range of Insight Index scores—from low performers to high—skews higher than other participating charter sectors elsewhere in the country. In part, we think this is because of efforts the Boston charter schools make to collaborate across the sector and share best practices.

For example, Kimberly Steadman, Co-Director of Academics for Brooke Charter Schools, describes sending teachers to visit classrooms in other local charter schools. Min Ji, Director of Talent for Match Education, notes that he participates in regular calls with hiring managers at other charter networks; their hiring strategies and timelines are closely aligned, even as they compete for talent. While the surveyed Boston charter schools look and feel different, they share a set of similar values, including thoughtful knowledge-sharing and a commitment to constant improvement.

School leaders elsewhere might consider looking for—or creating—opportunities for networking across schools within their own sectors. By making a commitment to the greenhouse schools practices across a handful of schools within a district or charter sector (or, ideally, between district and charter schools), school leaders may be able to push each other to improve results across the sector. One thing is clear: Boston's success with students isn't good luck; smart, strategic choices on the part of school leaders are contributing to the development of school environments where teachers can do their best work, and students are benefitting as a result.



APPENDIX: CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 1

Putting Student Growth First

CASE STUDY 2

Teacher Development Never Stops

CASE STUDY 3

It's All About the Right People

PUTTING STUDENT GROWTH FIRST

Boston Collegiate Charter School and Excel Academy - East Boston

Laying the Foundation for Student Growth

“Every student has the right to learn, with no distractions.” That’s how Rodney Coleman, Dean of Students at Boston Collegiate Charter School’s middle school campus, describes his primary goal: ensuring that every student in the school has the freedom to explore their learning, without anyone standing in their way—including themselves. “We make sure kids have a safe place to learn.”

At Boston Collegiate (BCCS), the staff describe their school’s culture as “warm strict.” The environment is both orderly and positive. Teachers’ profiles line a wall, sharing their likes and dislikes and inviting students to talk to them about an array of topics, from “issues related to race, society and stereotypes” and “being a student athlete in college” to “when I auditioned for American Idol.”

Clear expectations for student behavior, as well as a strong team culture among teachers and school leaders, undergird this “warm strict” school environment.

Across the city at Excel Academy’s East Boston campus, a similar—though not identical—set of expectations guides teacher and student cultures. Like BCCS, Excel focuses on clearly communicating those expectations to teachers, parents and students, generating buy-in and ensuring that follow-through is consistent.

Both Excel and BCCS have a “scope and sequence” for new teachers, which lays out their onboarding and training

process. Both place school culture and expectations for adults and students among the very first things teachers are expected to get up to speed with. Additionally, summer trainings for all teachers are valuable times to ensure that everyone is on the same page.

“Every student has the right to learn, with no distractions.”

-Rodney Coleman, Dean of Students,
Boston Collegiate Charter Middle School

Guidelines are communicated to parents through letters that include an “open invitation” to meet with school leaders, back-to-school nights, and regular phone calls home. At both schools, new students go through summer orientations, where they too get a crash course in how to succeed in their new school environments.

These clear expectations are about more than behavior; they’re also about preparing students to be focused learners. Excel Academy - East Boston teacher Andrew Marrone, who joined Excel this year after teaching in local suburban and urban districts, explains that the behavior expectations and the accountability they provide bring out the best in Excel’s students. “The kids here are awesome. But it’s because there’s a system in place for accountability. The kids respect each other and they respect themselves, and they love learning. That’s school culture.”

Kendra Heinricher, Excel’s Math Network Department Head and a veteran teacher, explains that school culture lays the groundwork for student growth. “Once we have a positive class culture, we’re then able to support the academic culture,” she says. “Then we can push kids to be stronger learners.”

“Once we have a positive class culture, we’re then able to support the academic culture. Then we can push kids to be stronger learners.”

-Kendra Heinricher, Math Network Department Head, Excel Academy - East Boston

Focusing on Student Growth

A singular focus on student growth is at the heart of greenhouse schools, and the Boston charter schools consistently build upon their solid learning environments to ensure that teachers and students can put growth first. At BCCS and Excel Academy - East Boston, school leaders have multiple systems in place to support teachers with planning and executing quality instruction.

The rich, thoughtful use of student data is central. Sources of data include everything from major and minor

assessments to exit slips, homework and class projects, as well as things like attendance and “send-out” rates. At Excel, because multiple teachers cover the same grade levels and content, teachers are able to compare data and borrow instructional strategies from colleagues whose students are mastering a particular topic more readily.

Support for teachers on *how* to think about and use data strategically is critical. In their first data meeting of the year, Heinricher says she models how she would analyze her own data. “I’ll walk them through how I identify tutoring groups and which strands need to be retaught.”

At BCCS’s middle school, Principal Emily Charton explains that diving into data early and often is the key to making it a consistent, useful practice for teachers. This year, Charton and her teachers sat down to analyze the previous year’s Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) data in August—several months earlier than they did last year. Teachers knew before they even started the year how they might need to focus their instruction to meet the needs of this group of students.

A common theme is the importance of ensuring that teachers leave data conversations with concrete action steps. Teachers are consistently asked to identify specific changes they’ll make based on the data—adjustments to a lesson plan to hit a tough strand or students they’ll

target for extra support. School leaders then loop back with teachers to see those changes in action. And because in these schools—as at others across the surveyed Boston charter schools—instructional leaders spend the vast majority of their time observing classrooms and meeting with teachers, there are ample opportunities to reconnect about how instruction has been adjusted and what’s happening with students as a result.

Fostering Productive Teacher Time

Structures for teachers to plan across content areas and grade levels are also critical in a school environment that fosters student growth. At Excel Academy - East Boston, time is dedicated for collaboration across both vertical and horizontal teacher teams. Teachers use their grade-level teammates to collaborate on classroom culture, or to support each other in working with particular students. On multi-grade content teams, teachers ensure vertical alignment from one year to the next, while grade-level content teams across the Excel network help teachers ensure that every student is building the same content knowledge.

Simply creating the time and space for these teacher meetings is intentional. That doesn’t mean taking teachers away from instructional time; rather, it means being more deliberate about structuring teachers’ planning time to foster collaboration that has a direct effect on student

learning. Principal Jennifer Gallaspy of Excel Academy - East Boston explains decisions Excel has made to achieve this: “At Excel, we have aligned our school day so that all schools in the network have an early release on Friday. This allows us to bring grade-level content teams together on a regular schedule to co-plan and collaborate, and share best practices.”

At BCCS, collaboration is embedded in the way office space is distributed: Teachers keep their desks in shared offices by grade level that make collaboration organic. Reading teacher and seventh grade team leader Kathleen Stern points out that this isn’t the norm: “In my old school, I would grade papers in my classroom by myself, and I would eat lunch in my classroom by myself. Having the shared office space is a huge deal.”

The common space allows teachers to get on the same page about what’s happening in their classrooms, share teaching strategies and coordinate major assignments or assessments so students aren’t overloaded.

Taken together, these choices—from the thoughtful use of time and space to supportive data analysis systems to behavior expectations that establish safe, respectful places to learn—all conspire to create environments where the central focus is on student growth.

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT NEVER STOPS

Roxbury Prep Lucy Stone and Brooke Roslindale

Reaching the Professional Development Tipping Point

“Professional development is the biggest domino,” says Sarah Lynch, Principal of Roxbury Prep Lucy Stone, part of Uncommon Schools. “I’m hyper-focused on teacher development.”

At Uncommon, Lynch explains that a staggered professional development structure allows for a slow release of new instructional strategies. School leaders gather regularly for professional development, led by Uncommon’s managing directors. A week later, instructional leaders from each school come together for the same development workshop. Finally, each school sends its strongest teachers to receive the same session.

Lynch describes what this means, using a recent session on data analysis as an example: “Now, in this building, I’ve been trained, my instructional leaders have been trained, and our strongest teachers have been trained, all in the same data analysis cycle. We’ve reached a tipping point in the building.” It makes it easier, she says, to spread new strategies consistently from teacher to teacher.

Making Great Teaching Visible

Even after a school reaches that tipping point, the successful dissemination of new instructional strategies still hinges on making clear to teachers what they’re aiming for. Defining excellent instruction—and making it clearly visible—is a core piece of how the participating Boston charter schools approach teacher development.

At Brooke Roslindale, part of Brooke Charter Schools, the teacher career pathway offers a unique structure for both elevating excellent instruction and making it visible to teachers so that they know what they are striving toward. The “master teacher” level, which comes with a substantial financial bonus, is a rare and highly respected designation. In the entire Brooke network, there are currently just five master teachers.

But the master teacher role isn’t considered a reward for attaining perfection as an educator. For one thing, the

designation needs to be earned anew each year. Emily Paret, a master teacher who teaches kindergarten, explains that the role has *allowed* her to continue to grow. “I have more opportunities to help other teachers grow now, which is helping me grow, too. I’m learning by talking through other teachers’ struggles.”

Paret’s attitude—that her development as a teacher never stops—reflects her school’s larger ethos. “We think teaching is really hard,” says Kimberly Steadman, Co-Director of Academics for Brooke Charter Schools. “No one will ever say, ‘I have learned everything there is to learn about teaching.’”

Brooke’s philosophy of professional development is that because it is a continuous process, all responsibility for development must live at the school level. “We think that learning needs to happen on the job,” Steadman explains.

The centerpiece of Brooke’s approach to teacher development is the opportunity for teachers to learn from high-performing colleagues and instructional leaders. Brooke does this not only by pairing their first-year associate teachers with high-performing colleagues as mentors, but also by getting teachers out of the building and into other schools as often as necessary.

Steadman explains that she’ll send her teachers wherever great instruction is happening—whether that means down the hall, across the city or as far afield as Japan. The school believes the financial investment in teacher development is worth the necessary tradeoffs: All of Brooke’s professional development activities are funded through the school’s per-pupil allocations, which Steadman explains is made possible by staying lean on non-instructional positions.

Watching great teaching in action is the fundamental building block of teacher development at Roxbury Prep Lucy Stone, as well. Lucy Stone’s three-week August training program is regarded as a critical time for establishing expectations for quality instruction. Teachers plan the first three weeks of lessons together, and then spend hours practicing those lessons.

In the third week of the August training, students arrive for pre-school orientation—but Lynch explains that this new student induction isn't really about teaching summer school; "it's about teaching the teachers how to get there." New teachers watch Lynch, her Dean of Instruction, coaches and veteran teachers in action with students—and *then* they practice teaching in front of students and receive feedback.

"To demonstrate the bar for excellent teaching, we have *only* those teachers teach" in the summer induction, Lynch says. "That's the only way to get that level of visibility for what great teaching looks like."

That commitment to both talking about and practicing instructional skills sets Roxbury Prep's style of professional development apart from what teachers there have experienced elsewhere. Eighth grade English teacher Cathryn Cook, who worked in a large district high school outside of Boston before coming to Lucy Stone, explains that in the past, her experience of professional development was focused on logistics, rather than instruction. "This is much more focused on your job as a teacher, and everything you need to do that well." Her colleague Toussaint Lacoste says that part of what makes Roxbury Prep's approach useful is the constant focus on what excellent instruction looks like.

Opportunities for "shout-outs" at the start of professional development sessions and in Lynch's weekly email newsletters are a key component of that focus. At Brooke Roslindale, great practices are made visible through "fireside chats" in professional development sessions, in which the principal will interview a teacher about a particular skill or strategy.

Prioritizing Observations and Feedback

Observations—and the feedback that follows them—are a critical component of teacher development across the surveyed Boston charter schools. Teachers in participating schools are receiving more observations, on average, than their colleagues nationwide, but it's not just the number of observations that matters—it's also the specificity of feedback that results from them. School leaders at Brooke Roslindale and Roxbury Prep Lucy Stone are similar to

their counterparts across the city in their focus on bite-sized skills. They're observing strategically, for something specific, and providing feedback on just that element.

Meghan Thornton, Principal at Brooke Roslindale, says the one-on-one sessions "pack the biggest punch" in terms of teacher development, so she invests a huge amount of time there. Every teacher in the school is observed a minimum of 20 times per year, and each observation is followed by a debrief that focuses on a specific goal. If a teacher is working on "increasing engagement in discussions, using cold calling," for example, that's all Thornton will focus on in her observation and feedback, until the teacher has mastered cold calling and moved on to a new goal.

"We think teaching is really hard. No one will ever say, 'I have learned everything there is to learn about teaching.'"

- Kimberly Steadman, Co-Director of Academics,
Brooke Charter Schools

Mia Avramescu, a third-year teacher at Brooke Roslindale, explains that she likes leaving an observation debrief with something she can change tomorrow. "It's not just general feedback that I should try to do more positive narration, for example. It's also something concrete, like *particular phrases* for positive narration that I can practice and try."

Beyond formal observations by instructional leaders, both schools employ simple strategies to give teachers the chance to regularly observe each other. Roxbury Prep Lucy Stone puts an extra desk in every classroom. Teachers use these spare desks to do their own planning work when they're not teaching—but the strategy encourages teachers to visit each other's classrooms. Thornton, too, regularly directs teachers to observe colleagues with particular skills. In both schools, the goal is to identify teachers' strengths and make them as visible as possible.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Match Education

Hiring Early and Strategically

Across the Boston charter schools we studied, school leaders share a common refrain: A school's success rests on getting the right people in the door. Without the right people, school leaders explain again and again, nothing else matters.

At Match Education, Min Ji, Director of Talent, networks all year long to connect to great teachers. "Any time a great teacher comes here, as soon as they get acclimated, I will sit down and have coffee with them and ask them who they know." Beyond the traditional recruitment strategies, like job postings and career fairs, Ji says that networking around great teachers is the approach that yields the strongest results. After all, talented teachers want to work with other talented teachers, and they tend to know others who meet that high bar.

Ji, like school leaders across the Boston charter sector, also stresses the importance of starting early in the school year. In fact, he views the hiring process as year-round; he's always thinking about the following school year—or the year after that—and how to connect to teachers who might

be a good fit for a position that opens up down the line. Hiring is a "very long game," he says.

Nationally, efforts to shift hiring timelines earlier tend to focus on the goal of filling positions by June or July, but according to the Boston charter schools, even that is too late. Ji explains that most of Match's open positions are filled by early March.

Ji's experience matches the research that teachers hired earlier tend to be more effective than those hired later. "In terms of our screens, people we've hired in the summer have not been as successful as those we hired earlier," he says.

In order to hire as early as February and March, school leaders have to have a good sense of what positions will be open, fairly early in the school year. This means having frank conversations with their teachers—which can be uncomfortable. The effectiveness of those conversations relies on the strong relationships teachers have built with school leaders and with their colleagues—on the sense that the school community is a team. At Match, school leaders tend to start having conversations with teachers about

their future plans in the fall, so that by Thanksgiving, they already have a pulse on which teachers are considering moving on. They aim to get commitment letters by December, even with the caveat that things can always change. By starting the conversation so early in the year, they're able to project more realistically about future openings and target hiring efforts accordingly.

Holding Candidates to a High Bar

Of course, getting the right people in the door doesn't just mean bringing them in early. It also means ensuring that they've got the teaching chops to meet the high standards at a place like Match, and that the school's culture and style are a good fit for the teacher. Ji explains that he wants teacher candidates to get a full, realistic picture of Match, so they can see for themselves up front whether or not it's a good fit.

After candidates complete the screening process, through written materials, a phone interview and reference checks, they spend nearly a full day inside the school, during which they'll teach a sample lesson, meet staff members and have a chance to soak in the culture. The goal is for candidates

to "look under the hood" of the school, Ji says. "We give them an opportunity to see the school and to talk with teachers without either myself or the school leader in the room, to see if this is the place for them."

The school visit, coupled with the sample lesson and the debrief that follows, is also how Match leaders capture a candidate's readiness to be successful there. Match's leaders are looking for teachers who have strong classroom management skills and content knowledge in their field, but they're also looking for teachers with a growth mindset, who are able to take feedback and put it to good use. Candidates are asked to process feedback on their sample lesson right then and share ideas for how they would change the lesson in the future; on occasion, candidates who show promise with mission-fit or classroom management skills but whose sample lessons fall short are given a chance to re-teach, to prove that they can take constructive feedback and translate it into meaningful improvement.

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TNTP is a national non-profit organization working to end educational inequality by ensuring that all students get excellent teachers. Founded by teachers and inspired by the power of great teaching to change lives, we help schools, districts and states grow great teachers, manage their teaching talent strategically, and build systems that prioritize effective teaching in every classroom. Since 1997, we have recruited or trained nearly 50,000 teachers for high-need schools, catalyzed large-scale reform through acclaimed studies such as *The Widget Effect* (2009) and *The Irreplaceables* (2012), pioneered next-generation teacher evaluation and development systems, and launched one of the nation's premiere awards for excellent teaching, the Fishman Prize for Superlative Classroom Practice. Today TNTP is active in more than 25 cities.

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For more information about the research methodology behind this paper, a technical appendix is available at www.tntp.org/greenhouse-schools-in-boston

