

Implementing cross-sector
collaboration through the

District-Charter Collaborative

A Case Study of Promising Practices

District-Charter
PARTNERSHIPS

INTRODUCTION

District-Charter Partnerships (DCP) is an initiative that is part of the Equity and Excellence for All agenda established by Mayor De Blasio. Its goal is to support meaningful collaboration between the district and charter sector in order to increase educator capacity and student learning in all New York City public schools. The District-Charter Collaborative (DCC) is one of the principal programs under the DCP umbrella. Spearheaded by the NYC Department of Education's (DOE) Office of School Design and Charter Partnerships and Office of Leadership, the program brings quads of schools (2 district and 2 charter) together to engage in structured collaboration through the creation of professional learning communities (PLCs). These PLCs aim to improve practice in one of the following Learning Focus Areas (LFAs): math instruction, supporting English Language Learners, restorative behavioral practices, and supporting students with disabilities.

Over the course of two years, members of DCC quads engage in the following activities to drive improvement within their LFA:

- **School Team Inquiry Meetings:** DCC schools form school teams that meet on a bi-weekly basis with their DOE facilitator. These teams work through an inquiry process on a school-specific problem of practice linked to their quad's LFA.
- **Interschool Collaboration:** With the help of their DOE facilitator, each school rotates hosting visits for other members of the quad once per month. Participants observe the hosting school's practices in their LFA and work together to problem-solve challenges. Throughout the day, participants also engage in relationship-building activities.
- **Professional Development (PD):** Quads are paired with an external PD provider, who offers resources, coaching, and other supports connected to their LFA.

DCC believes that, by engaging in these three activities, schools will improve educator practice and student outcomes, strengthen school capacity to engage in continuous improvement, and develop a strong culture of collaboration between district and charter schools.

This case study highlights promising practices for one key element of DCC – interschool collaboration. To better understand how schools implemented interschool collaboration in DCC, researchers in the DOE’s Research and Policy Support Group engaged in a two-year qualitative investigation that involved observations of DCC activities; interviews with principals, teachers, and facilitators; and an analysis of artifacts from quads’ work. The results from our research indicate that effective interschool collaboration between district and charter schools in DCC is fostered by:



Investing in relationship-building



Creating structures for collaborative problem-solving

Below we describe the ways in which one quad – Math 1 – engaged in these processes as part of their interschool collaboration during the 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years. We also highlight how this work led to the development of a strong culture of collaboration among district and charter educators in Math 1, as well as improvements in educator practice and student outcomes.



AT A GLANCE: MATH 1 QUAD

The Math 1 quad consists of two district elementary schools – Christopher Avenue Community School and P.S. 059 William Floyd – and two independent charter elementary schools – Amber Charter School and Bedford Stuyvesant New Beginnings Charter School. Three of the schools are located in Central and East Brooklyn and one school is in Upper Manhattan.

The schools decided to join DCC because they believed it would provide additional opportunities for feedback and learning. According to one school leader, “[we] envision a partnership where we can meet consistently to share best practices, analyze student data, engage in professional learning, provide and receive feedback collaboratively...[in order] to enhance teacher pedagogical practices.”

Schools also entered the program because they saw the potential in working across district and charter lines to improve teaching and learning. One school leader mentioned that “it is obvious that the time has come for us to break down the barriers between charter schools and [district] schools and work together for the common good of educating ALL children...No one system has all the answers, but we are more powerful together than as separate entities.” Lastly, each school in the quad entered the program with a strong desire to improve teaching and learning within their LFA – math instruction.

School	Enrollment	Grades Served	Demographics				% English Language Learners	% Students with Disabilities	% Poverty
			Asian	Black	Hispanic	White			
Amber Charter School	492	K-5	2%	31%	65%	1%	9%	15%	83%
Bedford Stuyvesant New Beginnings Charter School	676	K-8	0%	53%	45%	1%	13%	20%	93%
Christopher Avenue Community School	302	K-5	0%	66%	33%	1%	4%	21%	98%
P.S. 059 William Floyd	312	K-5	1%	51%	45%	1%	9%	25%	94%

Demographic percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding and because we did not include students who identified as other race categories.

MATH 1 QUAD: DEVELOPING COLLECTIVE CAPACITY TO IMPROVE MATH INSTRUCTION THROUGH DCC



Investing in Relationship-Building

The first critical element of successful collaboration between district and charter schools is investment in relationship-building. Effective relationship-building involves norming and trust-building activities aimed at (a) helping district and charter schools recognize shared cross-sector values, practices, and challenges and acknowledge and accept differences, and (b) developing a respectful environment where participants can sensitively express debate, take risks, and share with others without fear of rejection. Investment in relationship-building also involves an emphasis on the equal status of participants, so that all participants feel valued and take ownership regardless of their school role or sector.

Relationship-building that starts at the outset of the program and is continuously reinforced at each intervisitation is critical for building a foundation to engage in meaningful problem-solving around instructional challenges. According to the Math 1 quad's DOE facilitator, *"We are writing a story together. It's a story of collaborating across district and charter lines. It's a story of growing our mathematics practices. The only way we can write this story together is if we know each other, trust each other, and can be vulnerable with each other."*

The Math 1 quad intentionally fostered relationship-building among quad members by engaging in two critical practices: 'peeling the onion' to build understanding across district and charter schools and the development and use of PLC norms to build community.

"Peeling the Onion":

An Exercise to Build Understanding among Cross-Sector Educators

DCC facilitators engaged the Math 1 quad in "Peeling the Onion," an exercise to help unearth layers of assumptions and misconceptions that they may have about the other sector. The group was first asked to generate a list of assumptions about district and charter schools. In the second part of the activity, participants asked cross-sector educators (or the facilitator) clarifying questions about these assumptions. Lastly, the group discussed how they could move past these assumptions/questions to effectively collaborate together. Through this activity, participants had the opportunity to expand their understanding of cross-sector educators' experiences and begin to recognize shared challenges. In end-of-year interviews, participants noted the importance of this conversation in building the foundation for successful collaboration by clearing up misconceptions, deepening cross-sector knowledge, and creating an environment of openness among quad members. As one participant said, *"You have a lot of misconceptions about the differences between districts and charters. [Peeling the Onion] opened our eyes ... and gave us insights into how their schools work. [We learned] that there were a lot of similarities, especially in the challenges that we are faced with."*



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What was effective about Math 1's approach to relationship-building?
- How can your quad build strong relationships among participants that are continuously reinforced throughout the two years of the program?
- What challenges might your quad experience around relationship-building?

Development and Use of PLC Norms to Build Community

Towards the beginning of the program, Math 1 also developed norms for their PLC, which would help them create a safe environment for collaborative sharing and learning. To develop norms, the quad came together in a community circle at the direction of their DOE facilitator. The DOE facilitator began by providing a model norm: each member of the quad is equal parts a learner and a contributor. Then, quad members added their own norms, using a talking piece to ensure that each person had the opportunity to speak. Norms included active participation and engagement; sharing the mic; the provision of critical, specific, and actionable feedback; acceptance of non-closure in disagreements; transparency; respect; and honesty.

Throughout their two years in the program, the quad used the norms to guide their collaboration. As they worked together to collaboratively problem-solve, quad members were consistently engaged, routinely transparent with data, forthcoming and honest with challenges, and respectful in providing specific, action-oriented feedback. Because quad members felt ownership in the development of the norms, it increased buy-in and consistency in implementation. As new members joined the quad, they also quickly acclimated to the norms.



Creating Structures for Collaborative Problem-Solving

Paired with continual investments in relationship-building, it is critical that district and charter educators have structured opportunities that allow them to see one another's practice in action and problem-solve around challenges they are facing. These opportunities are most effective when they elicit the provision of constructive feedback and concrete next steps, rather than surface-level niceties.

By engaging in structured problem-solving opportunities, educators expand their knowledge of effective practices within their LFA, receive critical feedback on their problems of practice, and build their capacity to reflect on practice. In addition, engaging district and charter educators in structured problem-solving can deepen and reinforce collaborative relationships. As schools share areas of growth with one another, open up their classrooms for observation, and allow for critical reflection on their practice, they build trust and see the value in leveraging each other's expertise. Lastly, collaborative problem-solving can help district and charter educators – who may lack understanding of each other's work – see similarities in their practices and challenges and develop an understanding of their shared experiences.

Below we describe how the Math 1 quad: **(a)** designed problem-solving experiences that were intentionally connected to their inquiry goals and **(b)** engaged each individual in the quad in providing constructive, action-oriented feedback through debrief structures like Chalk Talk.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What was effective about Math 1's collaborative problem-solving strategies?
- How can your quad design collaborative problem-solving experiences that result in concrete takeaways?
- What challenges might your quad experience in designing collaborative problem-solving experiences?

Designing Problem-solving Experiences Connected to Inquiry Goals

Math 1 quad members deliberately focused intervisitations on eliciting feedback around their school-specific inquiry goals. In this way, they leveraged their partner schools' expertise to help them overcome specific challenges they were facing around math instruction.



SPOTLIGHT

Christopher Avenue Community School

"Problem of the Day" Reflection and Rubric Study

In fall 2017, Christopher Avenue Community School hosted an intervisitation for the partner schools in their quad. At the outset of the visit, Christopher Avenue shared that its goal for DCC work was to help students break down multi-step mathematical problems, and that they were using an activity called "Problem of the Day" – where all students solved word problems using graphic organizers – in order to achieve that goal. They then emphasized that they would like visiting schools to provide feedback around the "Problem of the Day" structure through two key activities: (a) evaluating a rubric that assesses students' effectiveness in solving the "Problem of the Day" and (b) examining strengths and areas of growth around implementation of "Problem of the Day" in their classrooms.

The group started with a rubric study. Using a modified consultancy protocol, visiting quad members asked probing and clarifying questions about the rubric and, afterwards, provided both positive and constructive feedback to the school team. After the rubric study, visiting quad members were able to see the "Problem of the Day" during classroom observations and provide additional feedback during a classroom observation debrief. These problem-solving activities helped the hosting school make critical refinements to their "Problem of the Day" process and rubric and introduced visiting schools to the "Problem of the Day" strategy and its usefulness. In fact, at the next intervisitation, another school in the quad explained that they had decided to adopt the "Problem of the Day" strategy and the rubric at their school as well.



Engaging Participants through Debriefing Structures like Chalk Talk

Math 1 quad members utilized debriefing structures that intentionally engaged all quad members – across roles and sectors – in contributing to the problem-solving process. These inclusive debriefing practices helped build deeper relationships between quad members at the same time that they maximized constructive feedback.

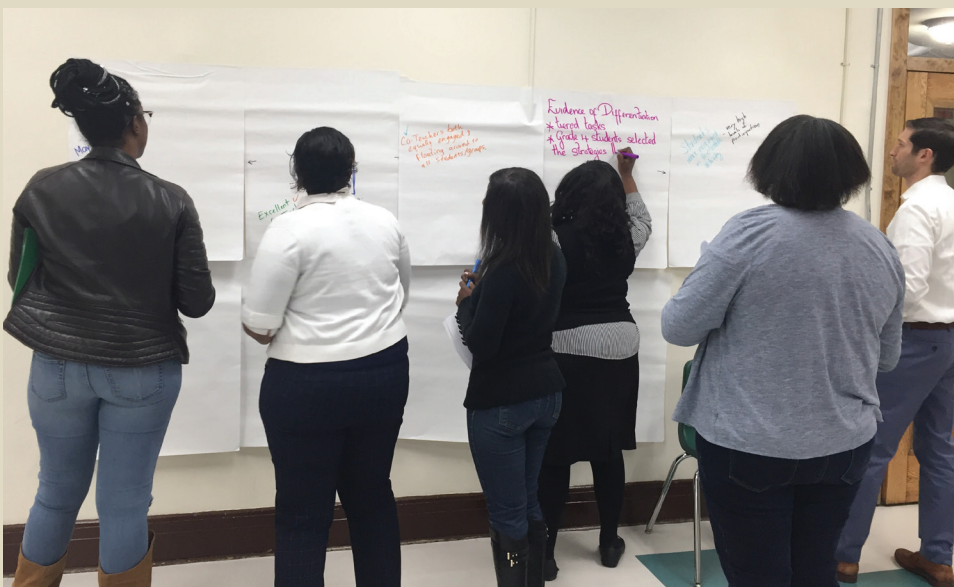


SPOTLIGHT

Bedford Stuyvesant New Beginnings Charter School

“Chalk Talk” Debrief

Bedford Stuyvesant New Beginnings Charter School employed a “Chalk Talk” protocol to debrief classroom observations at one school visit they hosted. During the “Chalk Talk” activity, quad members silently mapped their noticings around the school’s targeted areas for feedback (i.e. co-teaching, differentiation, and student discourse) onto chart paper. If quad members agreed with each other’s noticings and feedback, they could put a check mark next to it. As quad members charted, the hosting school asked clarifying questions on particular points of feedback. After all members of the quad had charted their feedback, the facilitator asked quad members to take a few minutes and read what had been charted. Afterwards, quad members engaged in a discussion around the targeted areas for feedback and potential next steps for the hosting school to improve their practice. This activity fostered an open and transparent discussion between all members of the quad, even those that may not always be the first to speak up. Bedford Stuyvesant New Beginnings staff also emphasized the value of “Chalk Talk” in providing comprehensive and constructive feedback around their practice, particularly around how to shift the ratio of teacher-student voice in lessons and discussions.



OUTCOMES

By investing in relationship-building and creating structures for collaborative problem-solving, the Math 1 quad was able to achieve the following outcomes:

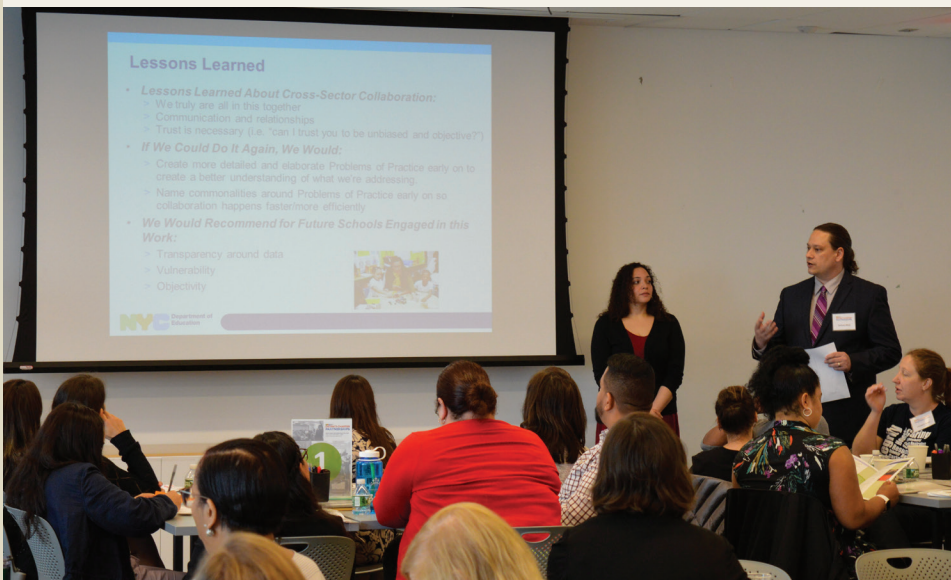
Development of a Strong Culture of Collaboration between District and Charter Schools

District and charter staff in the Math 1 quad built a strong sense of camaraderie, so that intervisitations felt like a *"caring space where people have a lot of respect for each other."* Within this space, quad members felt comfortable sharing data about student learning in math, including specific gap areas, and opening up their classrooms to constructive feedback, even when they were just beginning to try out new practices. According to one participant, *"no one is afraid to put their issues on the table, because we want to do better, and that's the culture of the quad."* Quad members also felt comfortable providing concrete, actionable feedback to one another aimed at fostering growth in their mathematical practice.

Importantly, the development of Math 1's culture of collaboration was not instantaneous. Rather, staff members' relationships deepened over time as participants built more familiarity with one another and their schools' practices and as they began to appreciate their cross-sector similarities. According to one participant, *"when we started, we had assumptions about district and charter schools...but as we went into schools and saw overlapping issues, we understood we were all on the same team."* As their relationships deepened, they saw each other less as independently operating schools and more as a collective unit with shared struggles. According to one participant, *"a lot of last year we were just telling our stories to each other...it was like we were on our own island...[and this year], it's no longer just my change idea, my school; it's about us as a quad because our goals seem more collective and we're making connections across schools."*

"When we started, we had assumptions about district and charter schools...but as we went into schools and saw overlapping issues, we understood we were all on the same team."

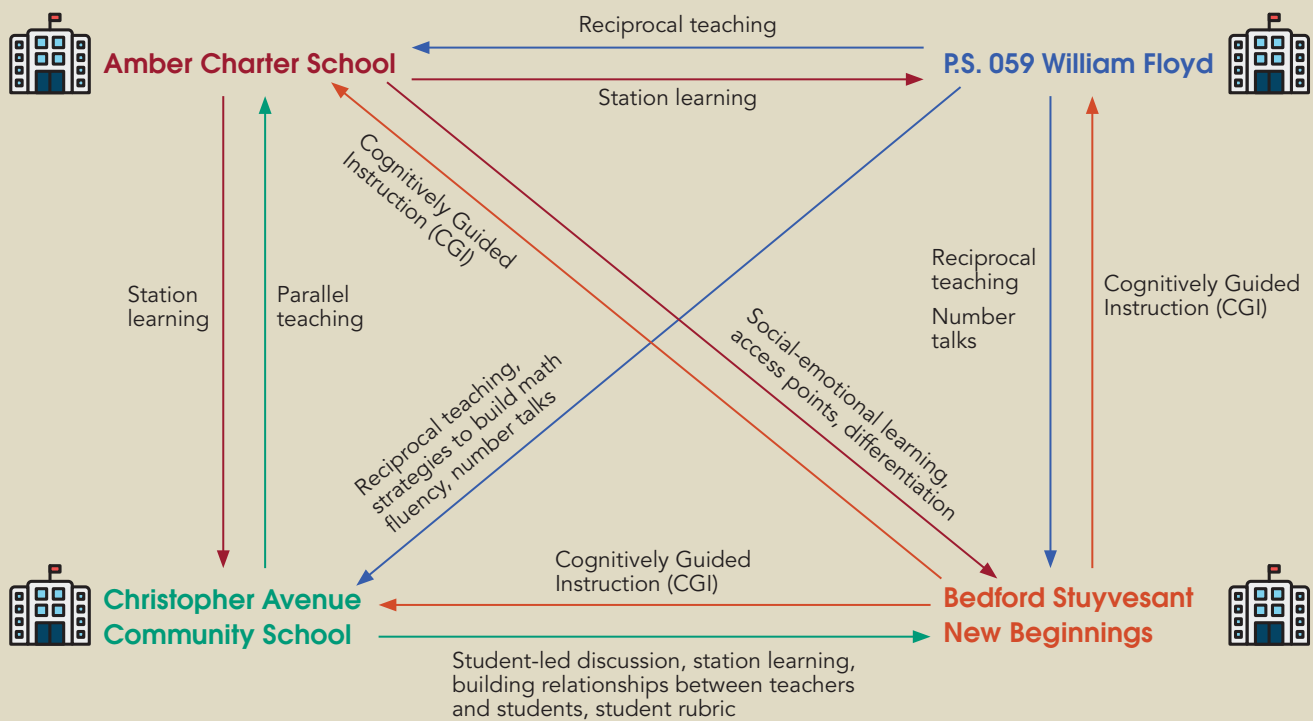
– Educator, Math 1 Quad



Improvement in Educator Practice and Student Outcomes

As the quad built a strong culture of cross-sector collaboration, they were able to support one another in enhancing educator practice. At intervisitations, Math 1 educators received high-leverage and concrete next steps to address school-specific problems of practice. They also learned about a variety of new promising strategies from one another that they could implement in their schools. According to one participant, "DCC is special because it provides schools with the funding and flexibility to break down silos of information and share best practices across schools." The visual below illustrates the types of strategies transferred across schools in the quad, including station learning, reciprocal teaching, and number talks. Importantly, each school learned at least two strategies from another school.

PRACTICES SHARED ACROSS THE MATH 1 QUAD



Quad members indicated that their schools saw meaningful improvements in teachers' mathematical instruction as they implemented feedback and new strategies. In turn, they began to see improvements in student outcomes, including greater student confidence and engagement in math, improvements in the quantity and quality of student conversation around math, greater ability of students to solve multi-step word problems, and greater evidence of student conceptual understanding in math.

For more information on District-Charter Partnerships, visit the DOE's *Equity and Excellence for All* webpage and read our first report, *Collaboration to Advance Teaching and Learning in New York City: Year 1 Evaluation Results*.