LEARNING FROM PROJECT L.I.F.T.

Legacy of a Public-Private School Turnaround Initiative

By Public Impact | Juli Kim and Daniela Doyle

PROJECT
LIFT
Leadership & Investment For Transformation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I n 2011, some of Charlotte's most influential foundations formed a partnership with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) to catalyze innovation and identify effective strategies to improve student performance and close the achievement gap in several of the district's lowest-performing schools. The L.I.F.T. initiative operated on three fundamental premises:

1. Garnering the collective resources of private and corporate philanthropy and working in partnership with the school district would achieve outcomes that no one foundation or the district could achieve on its own;

2. Implementing research-based interventions in four key school improvement areas—talent, time, parent and community engagement, and technology—would close the achievement gap;

3. Replicating the interventions that prove effective in the lowest-performing schools throughout the district could improve outcomes for all students.

The Project L.I.F.T. (Leadership and Investment for Transformation) partners chose West Charlotte High School (WCHS) and its feeder elementary and middle schools as the initiative's epicenter. Previously the district's flagship of successful integration and a symbol of individual and community success, WCHS had become by 2010 the city's lowest-performing high school with a 51 percent graduation rate.

L.I.F.T.'s leaders set lofty goals: By the initiative's end, 90 percent of WCHS students would graduate; 90 percent of students in L.I.F.T. schools would be proficient in reading and math; and 90 percent of students in L.I.F.T. schools would achieve more than one year's learning growth in one year's time. And, by the initiative's end, CMS would apply lessons learned to replicate the results district-wide.

Project L.I.F.T.'s Strategic Framework

To achieve its goals, L.I.F.T. focused its efforts in four discrete, but overlapping, areas that research suggests improve student achievement.

TALENT

L.I.F.T. sought to improve instruction by increasing the number of excellent teachers in schools. Key components of L.I.F.T.'s talent pillar included:

- Developing and implementing innovative teacher recruitment and retention strategies, including targeted and early recruitment of teachers likely to succeed in a turnaround environment and increased compensation.
- Implementing Opportunity Culture, an initiative that would create teacher-leader roles and provide career development and advancement opportunities for highly effective teachers.
- Systematizing professional development and coaching structures.
- Designating a dedicated human capital strategist to coordinate these strategies.

TIME

L.I.F.T. sought to increase instructional time and prevent summer learning loss. Key components of L.I.F.T.'s time pillar included:

- Implementing a program to help over-age and under-credited students graduate and help academically at-risk students stay on track to graduate.
- Increasing instructional time and reducing summer learning loss by using year-round calendars.
- Using small-group and 1:1 tutoring for the students most in need of additional academic support.

TECHNOLOGY

L.I.F.T. sought to close the digital divide for students and families in the West Charlotte corridor and eliminate a lack of access to technology as a contributor to the achievement gap. Key components of L.I.F.T.'s technology pillar included:

- Increasing student and parent access to computer hardware and broadband access.
- Increasing teacher capacity to use technology for instruction.
- Increasing parent capacity to use technology.
- Engaging community partners to address technology access issues.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

L.I.F.T. sought to engage community partners to address student needs and empower parents to be advocates for their children's education. Key components of L.I.F.T.'s parent and community engagement pillar included:

- Communicating the L.I.F.T. initiative to the West Charlotte and greater Charlotte communities.
- Engaging a network of community partners to provide wraparound supports to students to address their social-emotional needs.
- Increasing capacity of L.I.F.T. schools to involve parents in school and their students' learning.
- Increasing parents' capacity to advocate for their children's education and address family challenges that may impede student learning.

Project L.I.F.T.'s Challenges

Over the course of its seven years, L.I.F.T. faced a number of challenges on several fronts.

Communicating L.I.F.T. When the L.I.F.T. initiative was announced, public attention focused largely on the tremendous amount of philanthropic dollars generated—$55 million. Though in practice the L.I.F.T. funds amounted to about $1,000 per student per year, the amount of funding invested created unrealistic expectations that L.I.F.T. could fund "whatever it took" to improve student outcomes. At the same time, L.I.F.T. faced skepticism about its motivations. Together these misunderstandings resulted in a negative narrative in local circles that persisted throughout the initiative. Meanwhile, its communication strategy did not consistently and systematically target several critical audiences who stood to benefit from the initiative—including parents, community members, CMS central office staff, and teachers and leaders in other district schools—despite leaders' efforts to publicize their work in the West Charlotte community and throughout the city.

Data challenges. Data challenges further complicated L.I.F.T.'s ability to tell its story—specifically, moving academic targets and lagging data. State assessments used to measure proficiency changed during the L.I.F.T. initiative, as did the cut scores for proficiency and the way the state calculated the graduation rate, effectively changing the yardsticks L.I.F.T. leaders had set to measure the 90-90-90 goals. Further, L.I.F.T. struggled to access data when most needed to evaluate many of its efforts.

Funding trade-offs. L.I.F.T. had finite funds to execute an ambitious and multi-faceted school improvement strategy. Moreover, funders intentionally front-loaded the budget and had it decrease over time to avoid a funding cliff. As a result, the L.I.F.T. funders had relatively little flexibility to shift funds to address challenges or support promising practices that emerged in later years without also scaling down other efforts.

Leadership transitions. More than 55 L.I.F.T. teachers, assistant principals, and principals were promoted out of the classroom and into leadership positions over the course of the L.I.F.T. initiative. In addition, the CMS school board changed chairs four times, while the district went through five superintendents. With every person who departed, L.I.F.T. lost institutional knowledge and relationships developed and nurtured over time.

Sustainability planning. Though L.I.F.T.'s funders and the district leaders involved at the start of the initiative envisioned that CMS would apply what it learned from L.I.F.T. to other district schools, changes in district leadership tested the partnership and ultimately raised questions about the sustainability of some of the initiative's successes.

Working against the tide. L.I.F.T.'s leaders faced other challenges beyond their control as well. North Carolina's average teacher pay fell from 20th nationwide in 2001–02[1] to 49th in 2014,[2] making it more difficult for L.I.F.T. to recruit highly effective teachers. At the same time, increasing poverty in the West Charlotte corridor intensified the physical, social-emotional, and behavioral needs of students and their families. Further, L.I.F.T.'s leaders assumed that all students attending L.I.F.T. elementary schools would progress to L.I.F.T. middle schools, and then WCHS, thereby accruing increased school readiness and stronger achievement over time. But in actuality, the L.I.F.T. feeder pattern leaked, and just over a third of students previously enrolled at L.I.F.T. elementary or middle schools matriculated at WCHS, amounting to a 50 to 60 percent loss on every dollar invested in the lower grades.

Project L.I.F.T.'s Impact

Project L.I.F.T. concluded in 2019. Though it did not meet all its aspirational goals for improving student performance, L.I.F.T. helped illuminate a way forward for CMS and other districts working to turn around low-performing schools serving high-need students.

Student academic gains. L.I.F.T. schools continue to underperform the state on end-of-year assessments as measured by current proficiency measures. But L.I.F.T. supported several academic improvements. For one, it nearly reached its graduation goal; WCHS's graduation rate rose from 51 percent in 2010—the year before the L.I.F.T. initiative launched—to 88 percent the year before the state changed how it calculates the graduation rate. In addition, the percentage of rising ninth-graders on track to graduate increased from 52 percent to 73 percent over the same period, and L.I.F.T.'s five-year evaluation provided evidence that sustained student supports could shepherd improvements in student outcomes over time.[3]

Improved school culture. Student attendance in middle and high school grades increased, and suspension rates for high school students decreased. In addition, incoming ninth-graders at WCHS were less likely to demonstrate at-risk behaviors (poor attendance and failing courses, for example). The number of classrooms considered disengaged from learning (or off-task) also decreased, while the percentage of students staying on task increased. Teachers' perceptions of the instructional culture at L.I.F.T. schools improved as well.

Improved talent pool. Though teacher turnover remained a consistent challenge, L.I.F.T. nearly eliminated teacher vacancies in its schools—and filled them with more highly effective teachers than ever before.

Successful innovations. L.I.F.T.'s learning-laboratory approach yielded successful innovations that the district went on to replicate in other CMS schools, including Opportunity Culture—a school redesign effort currently in 51 CMS

schools that extends the reach of excellent teachers and their teams to more students, for more pay, within regular budgets, and creates development and advancement opportunities for teachers—and graduation academies that help over-age and under-credited students graduate. In addition, CMS learned several valuable lessons to use in the future: L.I.F.T.'s implementation of the Civic Tech Institute demonstrated that schools can serve as hubs for engaging community partners on technology access and provide a way to work with students' families, while the creation of PTAs and new partnerships with community organizations made clear that supports well-resourced schools often take for granted significantly enhance a school's capacity to meet the needs of parents and students.

Influence on philanthropy. L.I.F.T. offered new perspectives and expertise to shape school turnarounds in CMS schools and then provided the "risk capital" for the district to test new school turnaround ideas. In addition, the L.I.F.T. funders' multiyear commitment provided time for new ideas to take hold and develop.

Lessons Learned

Seven years of work also yielded important insights about what it takes to close achievement gaps and improve outcomes for students in high-need, low-performing district schools.

Public-private partnerships can successfully catalyze and scale innovation in public schools. Though the idea of public-private partnership is not new, L.I.F.T. offers a new proof point for the potential of private philanthropy to work with a school district to seed and grow high-impact innovations.

Multiyear initiatives should anticipate and protect against changes in leadership. Turnover in school and district leadership is inevitable. L.I.F.T.'s experience suggests that four actions can help hedge against the disruption such turnover often causes, including:

- Having a detailed agreement that makes expectations crystal-clear and reinforces accountability over time.
- Cultivating deep relationships throughout the district.
- Expanding the partnership circle to include civic organizations and city and county government offices with a strong interest in the initiative's success.
- Building an expectation among parents that the initiative's successful practices will continue regardless of leadership.

Effective talent strategies produce a deep (and regenerative) bench. L.I.F.T.'s leaders knew leadership turnover was inevitable, and they took steps to cultivate a deep leadership bench. However, L.I.F.T.'s success at cultivating talent proved a double-edged sword, as successful teachers and leaders moved to pursue new leadership positions in CMS and other districts.

Nonetheless, L.I.F.T. managed to keep replenishing its bench, proving that treating teachers and leaders like professionals is one key to recruiting and developing them in high-need schools. L.I.F.T. showed that even hard-to-staff schools can build a strong and sustainable leader pipeline when they treat their teachers and leaders right.

Effective communication considers the message and the audience. Without enough measurable milestones, L.I.F.T.'s leaders struggled to effectively demonstrate the initiative's impact and consistently tell its story. At the same time, L.I.F.T. missed opportunities to connect with several influential audiences, including other district school leaders and teachers who may one day benefit from its work. L.I.F.T.'s experience highlights the need to zero in on key messages about the work and consider the full range of stakeholders in communications.

Strategies that focus on working with parents rather than doing things for them are most sustainable. Though the full impact of L.I.F.T.'s parent engagement work remains to be seen, the early evidence suggests that the most successful strategies will be those that empower parents as active participants in their students' education.

School improvement efforts are more likely to have a lasting impact when a community also addresses the challenges associated with race, poverty, and equity. Both L.I.F.T.'s successes and shortcomings underscored the external factors that distract from learning. In a nod to the learning from L.I.F.T., community leaders formed a citywide task force in 2015 to examine the conditions that depress the city's economic mobility. It acknowledged the fundamental role of K–12 schools to improve education outcomes and opportunities for all students. But it also called on civic leaders and community-based organizations to support families and students in addressing the out-of-school factors that impede student learning.

Conclusion

Though Project L.I.F.T. fell short of its aspirational goals for student achievement, it left a legacy of innovation and learning useful for any district grappling to achieve equity for all students. CMS recognizes that "in some instances, equity means giving those with less more: more time for learning, more highly effective teachers to reduce learning gaps" and that "[e]ach student's needs may be different, but those needs should be met at every school."[4] Now it is up to CMS to apply the lessons learned from L.I.F.T. to this definition of equity.

Meanwhile, beyond Charlotte, L.I.F.T. has already become a model of how private foundations can work with public school districts to catalyze innovation to the benefit of all students. The L.I.F.T. public-private partnership illuminates the commitment and investment required of many community partners to turn around low-performing schools. Seeing other school districts adopt L.I.F.T. practices will only further its legacy.

Notes

1. North Carolina Association of Educators. (2013). *Trends in average teacher salaries, United States and North Carolina, 1982–83 through 2012–13*. Retrieved from http://www.ncae.org/wp-content/uploads/Trends-in-Avg-Teacher-salary-82-83-to-12-13-2-14-2013.pdf

2. National Education Association. (2015). *Rankings and estimates: Rankings of the states 2014 and estimates of school statistics 2015*. Retrieved from http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA_Rankings_And_Estimates-2015-03-11a.pdf

3. L.I.F.T. commissioned Research for Action to conduct a five-year evaluation of the initiative beginning in 2012–13, its first year of implementation. The L.I.F.T. governing board did not continue the evaluation when it extended the initiative for two additional years. See: Research for Action. (2018). *Project L.I.F.T.: Year five student outcomes memo.* Philadelphia, PA: Author. Retrieved from http://www.projectL.I.F.T.charlotte.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/L.I.F.T.-Year-5-student-outcomes-memo-and-executive-summary.pdf

4. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. (2018). *Breaking the link*, p. 9. Retrieved from http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/accountability/Documents/Breaking%20the%20Link%20English.pdf

LEARNING FROM PROJECT L.I.F.T.

Legacy of a Public-Private School Turnaround Initiative

I n 2011, some of Charlotte's most influential foundations formed a partnership with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) to catalyze innovation and identify effective strategies to improve student performance and close the achievement gap. Project L.I.F.T. (Leadership and Investment for Transformation) had lofty goals for West Charlotte High School (WCHS) and its surrounding elementary and middle feeder schools in Charlotte's west corridor. Within five years:

- 90 percent of WCHS students would graduate;
- 90 percent of students in L.I.F.T. schools would be proficient in reading and math; and
- 90 percent of students in L.I.F.T. schools would achieve more than one year's growth in one year's time.

After five years, CMS would apply the lessons it learned to replicate the results district-wide.

To achieve its goals, L.I.F.T. focused on four discrete, but overlapping, areas that research suggests improve student achievement: talent, time, technology, and parent and community engagement. With $55 million in hand, L.I.F.T. engaged a spectrum of partner organizations to support leaders and teachers and provide direct services to students and families.

Project L.I.F.T. concluded in 2019. Though it did not meet its aspirational goals, it has helped illuminate a way forward for CMS and other districts working to turn around low-performing schools serving high-need students. This report examines Project L.I.F.T.'s strategy, its implementation successes and challenges, and its lessons for philanthropists and school district leaders in Charlotte, as well as other urban communities across the country.

PROJECT L.I.F.T.'S STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Project L.I.F.T. was a public-private partnership built around two complementary theories:

- Private philanthropy could provide CMS with the resources it needed to implement research-based school improvement strategies that were proven to work elsewhere and test them to determine what is, or could be, effective in CMS.
- A collection of committed philanthropists working with a public school district could yield a collective impact that neither the district nor any one foundation could achieve on its own.

The Project L.I.F.T. strategy also presumed that a targeted effort focused on one of the most challenged areas in CMS (not the whole district) could serve as a learning laboratory to test strategies that CMS could then replicate elsewhere. The Project L.I.F.T. partners chose WCHS and its feeder elementary and middle schools as the initiative's epicenter.[1]

Previously the district's flagship of successful integration and a symbol of individual and community success as well, West Charlotte High had become by 2010 the city's lowest-performing high school, with the lowest CMS graduation rate of 51 percent.

Funding and Timeline

The Project L.I.F.T. funders included local and national foundations, local and national corporate sponsors, and individual donors, with its leading philanthropic supporters serving on the governing board. Originally, the board planned L.I.F.T. as a five-year funding initiative with implementation beginning in 2011, but the board voted in 2016 to extend it for two additional years to ensure that the district could continue the parts that showed success. In total, Project L.I.F.T. invested more than $62 million in West Charlotte schools between 2011 and 2019. On a per-pupil basis, this investment equaled an additional $672, in 2016–17, to $1,704, in 2011–12, per pupil per year (see Figure 1, page 15).

L.I.F.T.'S STRATEGY

The L.I.F.T. initiative operated on three fundamental premises:

1. Garnering the collective resources of private and corporate philanthropy and working with the school district would achieve outcomes that no one foundation or the district could achieve on its own.
2. Implementing research-based interventions in four key school improvement areas—talent, time, parent and community engagement, and technology—would close the achievement gap.
3. Replicating throughout the district the interventions that prove effective in the lowest-performing schools could improve outcomes for all students.

Four Research-Based Strategic Pillars

Project L.I.F.T.'s strategy focused on four areas of school improvement that research suggests yield the greatest return on investment for student achievement:

- **Talent**

  Improving instruction by increasing the number of excellent teachers in schools.

- **Time**

  Increasing instructional time and preventing summer learning loss.

- **Technology**

  Closing the digital divide for students and families in West Charlotte and eliminating a lack of technology as a contributor to the achievement gap.

- **Parent and community engagement**

  Engaging community partners to address student needs and empowering parents to be advocates for their children's education.

Over seven years, L.I.F.T. implemented various initiatives and interventions within each pillar. This report details each strategy and its component parts.

Figure 1. Project L.I.F.T. Annual Investment Per Student

	Year 1, 2012–13	Year 2, 2013–14	Year 3, 2014–15	Year 4, 2015–16	Year 5, 2016–17	Year 6, 2017–18	Year 7, 2018–19	Average per year
Investment per L.I.F.T. student	$1,704	$1,478	$1,100	$940	$994	$672	$716	$1,087

Figure 2. L.I.F.T. Strategic Framework

TALENT

Innovative recruitment and retention strategies

Opportunity Culture

Professional development and coaching

Dedicated human capital strategist

TIME

Graduation academy

Continuous-learning calendar

Tutoring

TECHNOLOGY

Access

Effective use

PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Communication

Wraparound services

School-based engagement

Parent empowerment
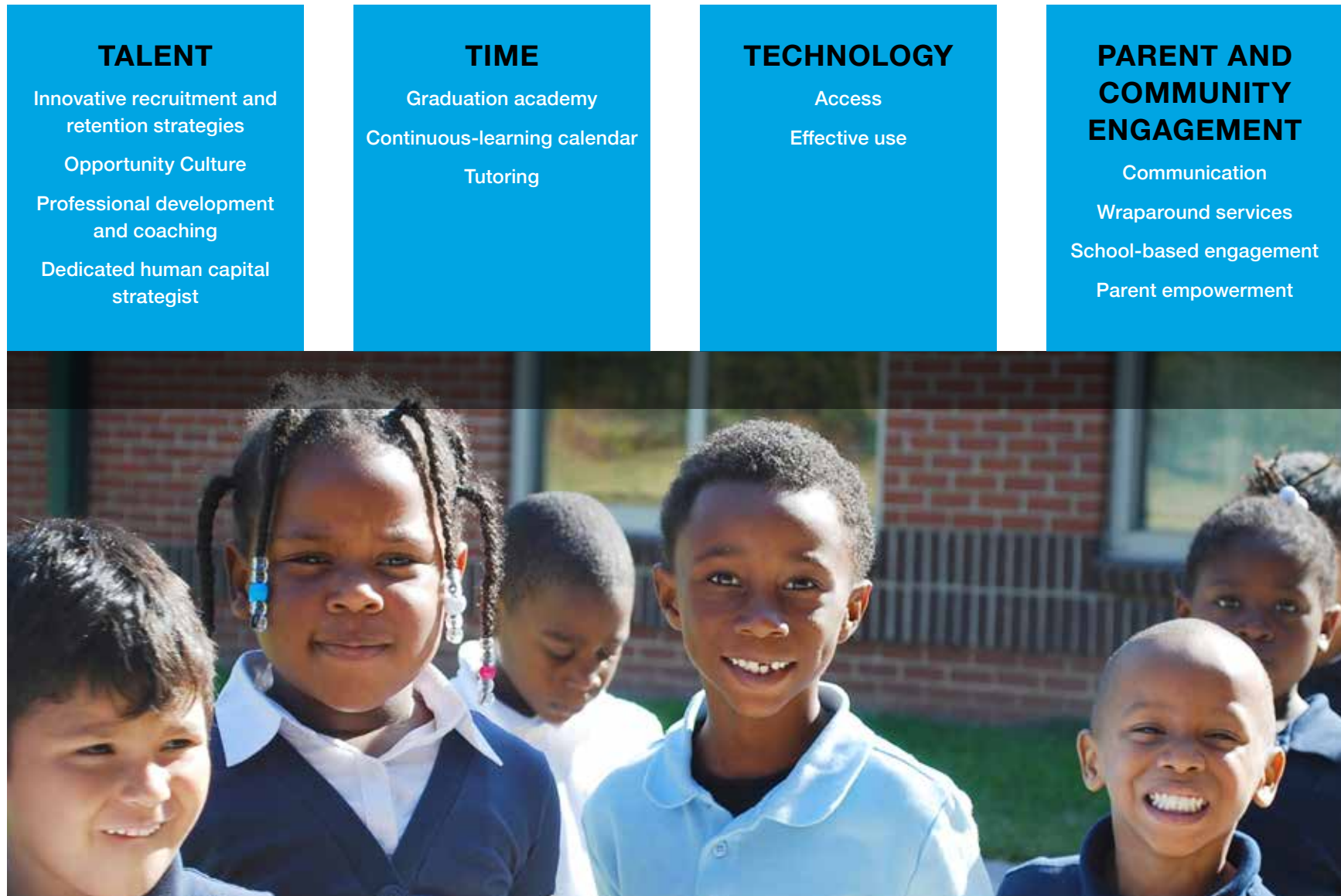
PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The L.I.F.T. funders all had long records of supporting education in Charlotte, and most had funded community organizations that implemented programs or supported district initiatives. But planning a school improvement strategy *with* CMS was entirely new. The L.I.F.T. funders wanted to help close the district's achievement gap, but they did not have a plan for doing so. Rather, they approached the district to collaborate, and together, they considered how the collective resources of private and corporate philanthropy, supporting a plan developed in partnership with the district, could achieve results no funder working alone with the district had achieved.[2]

Learning What Works

They decided to use the private funding L.I.F.T. offered to test whether research-based and other promising strategies worked in CMS; if so, then the funders expected CMS to fund them internally and expand them to other schools. Hence, the L.I.F.T. funders and the district, along with community leaders whom the funders invited to help lead the initiative, spent seven months researching policies and practices that had been effective in closing achievement gaps in other communities, and consulting with leading education reform experts.

A Dual Governance Structure

The L.I.F.T. funders and district also planned to share ownership of L.I.F.T.'s oversight via a dual governance system for a semi-autonomous learning community. A scantly worded five-page memorandum of understanding outlined general terms of the partnership. Its bylaws detailed a governance board consisting of voting members—L.I.F.T. funders who committed at least $2 million—and non-voting members, including community representatives, the CMS superintendent, and Charlotte's mayor at the time, Anthony Foxx.[3] In practice, the L.I.F.T. board also included the sitting CMS school board chair as an ex-officio member. (See Figure 3, page 18.) Other school board members frequently attended monthly L.I.F.T. board meetings as well.[4]

Both private and public partners had operational and governance responsibilities. CMS established the L.I.F.T. zone as one of seven CMS learning communities (or sub-districts) with its own superintendent. The L.I.F.T. learning

Figure 3. Project L.I.F.T. Governance

Project L.I.F.T. Funders		Community at-large	Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools	
Non-board members	**L.I.F.T. board members ($2M+ funders)**		**CMS school board**	**CMS administration**
	PROJECT L.I.F.T. GOVERNING BOARD			
Individuals and foundations contributing up to $2 million	The Belk Foundation Foundation For The Carolinas Wells Fargo Foundation John S. and James L. Knight Foundation Duke Energy Bank of America C.D. Spangler Foundation Leon Levine Foundation	Representatives from the civic and business communities	CMS school board Chair (ex-officio member)	Superintendent (non-voting member) Chief Academic Officer (ex-officio member)
			Denise Watts, Project L.I.F.T. executive director	
			L.I.F.T. Learning Community	

community operated as any other CMS learning community, but it also had autonomy to deviate from certain district policies and practices as necessary to implement L.I.F.T. strategies, such as staffing and setting the school calendar.

Meanwhile, the L.I.F.T. board administered funds that supported the implementation of L.I.F.T. strategies. Since L.I.F.T. would end in a few years, the board operated as an initiative under the fiscal agency of one funder, Foundation For The Carolinas, rather than incorporating as a nonprofit.

Both the district and the L.I.F.T. board oversaw Denise Watts, the L.I.F.T. learning community superintendent. Watts, a renowned CMS principal and proven

school turnaround leader, was originally hired to oversee L.I.F.T. as its executive director employed by the Foundation For The Carolinas. But it quickly became apparent that her authority over L.I.F.T. schools and her access to district resources and school data was limited because she was not a CMS employee. Trusting that the district would grant Watts the needed autonomy to execute the L.I.F.T. strategy, the funders allowed her to become a district employee again. L.I.F.T. still financially supported Watts and her learning community staff by reimbursing the district for those personnel costs. Thus Project L.I.F.T. operated as a semi-autonomous learning community overseen by a district-employed superintendent who was also accountable to a private governing board.

TALENT

The L.I.F.T. funders knew from the start that having excellent leaders and teachers in every L.I.F.T. school was their top priority. CMS had already adopted a strategic staffing initiative, in which successful principals and their hand-picked teaching teams moved to low-performing schools. So both partners recognized that improving the quality of leaders and teachers in L.I.F.T. schools would improve instruction, and eventually, student achievement. Hence, the L.I.F.T. talent strategy focused on recruiting and retaining excellent educators.

Innovative Recruitment Practices

As L.I.F.T. was starting, North Carolina's growing reputation for low teacher salaries and low overall education funding deterred many high-potential candidates from other states, and had even pushed some CMS teachers to move out of state. With this backdrop, L.I.F.T. introduced new strategies for recruiting highly effective teachers and leaders both from within CMS and beyond.

Targeted marketing

L.I.F.T. continued participating in the traditional recruiting venues—for example, attending job fairs and posting vacancies on the district website—but it also tried new methods, including using social media outlets and pursuing referrals. At one point, L.I.F.T. even paid its teachers if they referred excellent candidates from outside of CMS. L.I.F.T. also developed new messages and marketing materials, including video clips, specifically designed to attract top-performing teachers committed to working in high-need school environments.

Critical competencies for screening

L.I.F.T. developed new, research-based criteria to screen applicants. In addition to looking for teachers who had proven track records with student outcomes, L.I.F.T. identified critical competencies that teachers and leaders who are successful in low-performing schools demonstrate, such as a drive to achieve, adaptability, and coachability. L.I.F.T. used these competencies to differentiate among applicants and prioritized those who demonstrated the desired characteristics and skills.

TALENT

L.I.F.T. sought to improve instruction by increasing the number of excellent teachers in schools. Key components of L.I.F.T.'s talent pillar included:

- Developing and implementing innovative teacher recruitment and retention strategies, including targeted and early recruitment of teachers likely to succeed in a turnaround environment and increased compensation.
- Implementing Opportunity Culture to create teacher-leader roles that provide career development and advancement opportunities for highly effective teachers.
- Systematizing professional development and coaching structures.
- Designating a dedicated human capital strategist to coordinate these strategies.

I am surrounded by positive, passionate people who believe like I do that our students can and will achieve the same things that students in more affluent schools do.
—L.I.F.T. teacher

Early hiring

L.I.F.T. found that most high-quality—and highly recruited—candidates received offers from other districts before CMS schools were allowed to extend them toward the end of the school year. Further, late-summer hires often struggled the most and were most likely to quit midyear. By its second year, L.I.F.T. received permission to recruit candidates earlier in the spring. As an additional incentive, L.I.F.T. also gave hiring bonuses to newly hired experienced teachers whose records suggested they had a high potential to succeed in L.I.F.T. schools. But over time, as L.I.F.T. found that teachers valued the professional development and career advancement opportunities that it offered more than monetary incentives, it discontinued hiring bonuses.

Innovative Retention Strategies

L.I.F.T. also adopted new strategies using compensation and professional development to encourage highly effective teachers and leaders to stay in its schools. These strategies also created incentives L.I.F.T. could use to recruit candidates.

Retention bonuses and performance awards

In its first two years, L.I.F.T. rewarded teachers and staff who demonstrated excellence. All L.I.F.T. employees from principals to maintenance staff were eligible for monetary performance rewards. The teachers who received awards were the most effective teachers—deemed "Irreplaceables" as top performers based on critical turnaround teacher competencies, including teamwork, student impact and achievement data, and teacher attendance—and teachers in tested subject areas who achieved high student growth (defined as exceeding

expected growth on annual achievement tests). By year three of L.I.F.T. implementation, only the teachers who achieved high student growth in tested subject areas and the top 25 percent of Irreplaceables received salary bonuses.

Professional development

A cadre of leading professional development organizations including the School Turnaround Program at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business, Relay Graduate School of Education, the Center for Transformative Teacher Training (CT3), and TNTP worked with L.I.F.T. staff to hone skills and practices related to turnaround school leadership, curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom management. L.I.F.T. also provided its central office and school leaders with professional development on self-care and nurturing in the hope that such support would help principals avoid burnout.

Over time, L.I.F.T. also shifted how it provided professional development. In the early years, all principals received training first (for example, from the University of Virginia's school turnaround program or Relay), then instructional leadership team (ILT) members were trained. Individual ILT members also received additional, different professional development aligned with the needs of their school.

As its coaching model became more systematized, principals and their ILTs received professional development together, which L.I.F.T. found led to their providing better professional development for other school staff, which in turn enhanced coaching and improved teaching practice. Notably, L.I.F.T. Superintendent Denise Watts participated in all the professional development that principals received; by all accounts, that enhanced her ability to support principals.

I love the professional development that L.I.F.T. offers. I always feel incredibly supported, and that's something I've never experienced before.—L.I.F.T. teacher

Opportunity Culture

Opportunity Culture represented an exception to L.I.F.T.'s strategy to try evidence-based approaches, but it also offered L.I.F.T. a new tool in its arsenal of recruitment and retention strategies. Designed to extend the reach of excellent teachers to more students, Opportunity Culture redesigns schools to create well-paid, sustainable teacher-leader roles that keep excellent teachers in the classroom while providing them with career development and advancement opportunities. Opportunity Culture teacher-leaders—most notably the foundational role of multi-classroom leaders, who lead small teaching teams— receive sustainable pay supplements paid for through reallocations of regular school budgets. (Note: This report's authors are employed by Public Impact, the education and research consulting firm that founded Opportunity Culture and provided consulting services to L.I.F.T. and CMS in its implementation.) Thus, Opportunity Culture helped L.I.F.T. offer excellent teachers a way to develop in their profession, support and develop other teachers, and receive substantial additional compensation for their efforts.

Coaching

A systemic coaching structure also emerged in L.I.F.T. schools over time. By design, Watts worked with L.I.F.T. principals to implement new programs, plan professional development for teachers, and provide feedback on their leadership practices. In turn, L.I.F.T. principals worked with their ILTs, which generally consisted of the school's multi-classroom leaders (see Opportunity Culture discussion above), to support them and provide feedback on their leadership practices. Multi-classroom leaders then worked with their teaching teams through co-planning, co-teaching, modeling instruction, data analysis, and providing coaching and feedback to help teachers improve their practice and ultimately student performance.

Through its partnership with CT3, principals identified teachers to provide the same kinds of supports—including real-time coaching in classroom management and pedagogical approaches—to teachers in the building who did not have Opportunity Culture roles or belong to a multi-classroom leader's team.

Thus, all teachers in a L.I.F.T. school received regular coaching and developmental feedback that helped them develop, support student learning, and thrive in a turnaround school setting. Moreover, the network of feedback loops that this systematized coaching structure created helped enhance and sustain L.I.F.T.'s investments in professional development by increasing opportunities for that learning to pass from one leader or teacher to another.

The best thing about working in a L.I.F.T. school is having the support of someone who is not an administrator to coach me on everything from academics to classroom management to assessments.—L.I.F.T. teacher

Dedicated human capital strategist

L.I.F.T.'s talent strategy required dedicated and specialized support, so L.I.F.T. hired Dan Swartz, a former Wells Fargo recruiter, to help school principals recruit and retain excellent teachers and principals. Swartz worked with Watts to develop and refine L.I.F.T.'s specialized recruitment and retention strategies, and he screened candidates and coordinated hiring activities. He also supported the delivery of professional development for L.I.F.T. principals and teacher-leaders.

Under Swartz's direction, L.I.F.T.'s talent strategies have eliminated vacancies in its schools. The retention of highly effective teachers also increased: from 2012 to 2018, L.I.F.T. retained 75 to 87 percent of Irreplaceables and about 90 percent of top-rated teachers on the state's teacher assessment scale each year.[5] In addition, L.I.F.T. has transformed once hard-to-staff schools into a talent pool for leaders of other CMS schools and learning communities (and, inadvertently, for other districts). Within L.I.F.T.'s timeline, at least 55 L.I.F.T. teachers, assistant principals, and principals were promoted to leadership positions within and outside of the district.

TIME

L.I.F.T. placed great importance on increasing instructional time to make up for and prevent learning loss. Though research was not entirely clear on the benefits of extended learning time on student achievement, L.I.F.T. funders were willing to test the strategy. In one of the most evident applications of its "learning laboratory" approach, L.I.F.T. tested two strategies: year-round school calendars and the "L.I.F.T. Academy." Beginning in its last year, L.I.F.T. also funded tutoring.

Helping Students Graduate

L.I.F.T. established the L.I.F.T. Academy, a "graduation academy" that operates as a separate, non-traditional high school within West Charlotte High School to help off-track and at-risk high school students graduate. Originally designed to meet the needs of older students—18- and 19-year-olds just a few credits shy of graduating, including those who work or have family responsibilities—L.I.F.T. obtained a seat-time waiver from the N.C. Department of Public Instruction. That allowed it to offer flexible day and evening scheduling of individual and group-based instruction and online courses to help students get back on track to earning a high school diploma. The L.I.F.T. Academy also works with students on developing skills related to job readiness and career planning, college preparation and planning, and financial literacy.

Within its first few years, L.I.F.T. expanded its model to serve younger students—10th-graders and second-semester ninth-graders who are academically at risk of not graduating with their peers (as indicated by issues such as poor attendance, failing course grades, and suspensions from school). L.I.F.T.'s leaders hoped that supporting students earlier during high school would reduce the number of over-age and under-credited students needing the L.I.F.T. Academy and also improve student learning and outcomes each year.

Since it began in 2013, the L.I.F.T. Academy has served more than 600 students, and over its first six years, on average 80 percent of each cohort graduated.[6]

L.I.F.T. sought to increase instructional time and prevent summer learning loss. Key components of L.I.F.T.'s time pillar included:

- Implementing a program to help over-age and under-credited students graduate, and help academically at-risk students stay on track to graduate.
- Increasing instructional time and reducing summer learning loss for elementary and middle school students by using year-round calendars.
- Using small-group and 1:1 tutoring for the students most in need of additional academic support.

Continuous Learning Calendars

Research suggests that shorter summer breaks help students avoid summer reading loss, so L.I.F.T. implemented two kinds of year-round calendars at four K–8 L.I.F.T. schools. The schools spread their days throughout a school year that begins in July, and included "intersessions," two- to six-week breaks for students. L.I.F.T. also funded area nonprofits to provide optional literacy programming during intersessions. Additionally, two of the schools were open for the state-mandated 180 days, while two added 19 instructional days for a total of 199 days. L.I.F.T. wanted to learn what would yield improved student results—year-round school, year-round and extra days, or both.

Implementing these continuous learning calendars (CLC) presented challenges. Since CLC schools ran counter to state policy limiting when students may attend school during summer months, L.I.F.T. had to obtain a seat-time waiver from state law. The North Carolina legislature crafted the exception so narrowly that only L.I.F.T. schools were eligible, but in gaining the exemption, L.I.F.T. received an exemption that CMS and other districts had previously been denied.

Over time, L.I.F.T. also found that CMS systems did not fully support the CLC model. For example, though L.I.F.T's CLC schools needed year-round transportation, the CMS central transportation office operated with reduced or no central office transport staff during the summer. Also, since the four L.I.F.T. schools were the only CMS schools operating on an extended-learning calendar, only L.I.F.T. had any communication with parents of students in those four schools about the importance of sending their children to school starting in July. It was not a message that the district reinforced.

Summer attendance with a July start proved problematic, too. As L.I.F.T. board members considered implementing the year-round calendar concept, they recognized that it would be a significant change for CMS families, so they solicited parental input. Most parents at the four schools that adopted the CLC favored it, but the schools did not have full attendance until well into the fall. Transience associated with poverty always resulted in some students joining school after the school year began, but L.I.F.T.'s CLC schools had many students who did not show up until the end of August, when the traditional school year started.

The CLC schools were also expensive to operate. Intersession camps that ran during school breaks cost about $62,000 per school each year. L.I.F.T. also had to spend more on transportation and staff salaries in the schools with additional days for a total cost (including intersession camps) that ranged from $850,000 to $1 million per year, depending on the school's population. In spring 2019, L.I.F.T.'s last year, the CMS school board voted to discontinue the continuous learning calendar model.

Tutoring

Beginning in its last year (2018–19), L.I.F.T. began supporting reading and math tutoring at some of its elementary schools. Though L.I.F.T. had improved instructional quality via its talent initiatives, it recognized the need to give some students extra skill-building through small-group and one-on-one instruction. L.I.F.T. engaged two community volunteer programs to tutor elementary students at three schools.

TECHNOLOGY

Project L.I.F.T. funders credit students and families in the West Charlotte corridor for the initiative's inclusion of technology-related interventions. In the town hall meetings that L.I.F.T. funders hosted while they were investigating school turnaround strategies, high school students and parents emphasized the technology gap dividing West Charlotte residents from wealthier neighbors. So L.I.F.T. worked to increase their access and capacity to use technology to support learning and close the digital divide, and improve the way teachers used technology in the classroom.

Access to Technology

At the beginning of L.I.F.T., schools did not have technology hardware, and most students did not have computers at home. L.I.F.T.'s initial technology strategy was to infuse its students' schools and homes with computers and laptops. Beginning in 2012, L.I.F.T. and several partner organizations, including Microsoft and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, put nearly 4,000 laptops in L.I.F.T. schools and offered over 600 L.I.F.T. families subsidized laptops and a year of free internet access.

Sometimes we have to go to the library, or we have to ask people if we can use their computer. It can be really difficult and stressful. [My son's] like, "Mom, can we get wifi? And I'm like, "Yes, Mom's trying to get it back on," but now with us having other bills, it's not a big priority, but it is a priority.
—L.I.F.T. parent who participated in the digital inclusion class

After the first year, however, L.I.F.T. was inundated with "tech support" requests. Lacking technology know-how, families called L.I.F.T. when their devices broke or their internet was disconnected. L.I.F.T. briefly contracted with a local organization to provide tech support but knew it could not fund that service indefinitely. Since 2015, L.I.F.T. initiatives have instead focused on increasing the digital literacy of L.I.F.T. parents and guardians so they can better monitor and support their children in school, communicate with teachers, and get access to critical resources like health care and employment opportunities.

TECHNOLOGY

L.I.F.T. sought to close the digital divide for students and families in the West Charlotte corridor and eliminate a lack of access to technology as a contributor to the achievement gap. Key components of L.I.F.T.'s technology pillar included:

- Increasing student and parent access to computer hardware and broadband access.
- Increasing teacher capacity to use technology for instruction.
- Increasing parent capacity to use technology.
- Engaging community partners to address technology access issues.

In 2018, L.I.F.T. also introduced the Civic Tech Institute, three technology-based opportunities designed to increase L.I.F.T. parents' digital literacy and capacity for using technology for self-advocacy (see "Project L.I.F.T.'s Civic Tech Institute," page 28). Within six months, the Civic Tech Institute engaged nearly 1,500 people. As of this writing, CMS is planning to build upon and expand the Civic Tech Institute using a two-year matching grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

The digital inclusion class helped me out a lot. I didn't have a computer or internet at home for my kids to do homework or anything on. The class also taught me everything I needed to know about a computer. It was a wonderful experience— I would recommend it to anyone.—L.I.F.T. parent

PROJECT L.I.F.T.'S CIVIC TECH INSTITUTE

In its final year, L.I.F.T. staff members who led the parent and community engagement and technology strategies developed an initiative that would increase parents' access to technology, equip them with skills to use technology to engage in and support their children's education, and help them address family challenges that impede student learning. The plan required the partnership of several community organizations, and in so doing, engaged the broader community to help close the digital divide.

The Civic Tech Institute consists of three programs supported with targeted grant funds from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation:

- **THE DIGITAL INCLUSION INSTITUTE** is a six-week basic computer and internet skills program for parents. Participants who complete the program receive laptops and one year of free internet access that Mobile Citizen provides through the Knight Foundation grant. (After the first year, service may be continued at a cost of $10 per month.) Students at West Charlotte High and another high school refurbish the laptops as part of paid internships in computer labs that the nonprofit E2D (Eliminate the Digital Divide) operates and oversees. As of this writing, more than 350 participants in 22 cohorts have completed the six-week digital inclusion class on digital literacy.

- **POP-UP VILLAGES** are mobile, community-based "festival" events designed to encourage West Charlotte parents to engage with educators outside of school. L.I.F.T. central staff organize and coordinate school leaders and teachers to lead STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) learning activities for children. Other community organizations provide information on local resources and services (for example, tax preparation, financial counseling, and benefits eligibility screening) or provide clothing, gently used books, and other donated goods to adult participants.

- **THE CHARLOTTE TRAJECTORY** is a one-stop service designed to help parents determine their eligibility for benefits, obtain referrals for free or reduced-cost services, and gain access to resources such as tax preparation, legal and financial counseling, medical care, and job training. Offered in partnership with Johnson C. Smith University, the service is staffed by students getting a master's degree in social work, who use a program (Single Stop) that was originally designed to support community college students. As of this writing, more than 50 families have sought help connecting to benefits and services through Charlotte Trajectory.

"Pop-up Village helped me connect with people who can help me in one space so I didn't have to go to five different offices during the week when I was working."—L.I.F.T. parent

Using Technology in the Classroom

L.I.F.T. also took steps to better use technology in the classroom. In 2014–15, CMS implemented its one-to-one technology strategy. With the district supplying hardware, L.I.F.T. shifted its focus to teaching teachers how to use technology in the classroom to enhance instruction rather than using technology as substitutes for blackboards and libraries, or platforms for taking tests. L.I.F.T. hired central staff with expertise in both technology and instruction to cultivate a corps of digital teacher-leaders (DTLs). These were L.I.F.T. teachers who were trained to use technology for personalized learning and project-based learning, who could also teach and coach other teachers to do the same.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The L.I.F.T. collaborators recognized the important role parents have in their children's education and the out-of-school challenges that impede learning for many L.I.F.T. students. In response, L.I.F.T.'s final pillar committed to engaging parents and the community, empowering parents to be active participants and advocates in their children's education, and harnessing community resources to address the needs of students and families that present impediments to learning. Since L.I.F.T.'s initial research and consultation with school turn-around experts did not reveal a specific model, L.I.F.T. charted its own path.

Community Outreach

To effectively involve both parents and community partners in its work, Project L.I.F.T. needed to be known in L.I.F.T. neighborhoods. L.I.F.T. leaders also wanted to avoid perpetuating mistrust of the school system and a sense of disenfranchisement that some community members had in the wake of recent school closings in West Charlotte. So they organized large community events to draw West Charlotte residents into the L.I.F.T. initiative. They used town hall meetings to introduce themselves and their objectives, and to gather input from parents regarding their concerns about schools, ideas for closing the achievement gap, and feedback on strategies. L.I.F.T. also hosted social events in the West Charlotte community intended to maintain dialogue about the initiative, deepen community trust in it, and stoke energy and momentum around its mission.

For example, L.I.F.T. revived a once highly popular neighborhood festival highlighting the artistic talents of West Charlotte residents, which had been an annual reflection of pride in the black community's heritage—drawing hundreds across the area L.I.F.T. served. In addition, L.I.F.T. staff used social media—including text messaging, Facebook, and Twitter—to update parents on L.I.F.T. news and events, and they shared successful initiatives and events with local media to inform the broader community about Project L.I.F.T.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

L.I.F.T. sought to engage community partners to address student needs and empower parents to be advocates for their children's education. Key components of L.I.F.T.'s parent and community engagement pillar included:

- Communicating the L.I.F.T. initiative to the West Charlotte and greater Charlotte communities.
- Engaging a network of community partners to provide wraparound supports to students to address their social-emotional needs.
- Increasing capacity of L.I.F.T. schools to involve parents in school and their students' learning.
- Increasing parents' capacity to advocate for their children's education and address family challenges that may impede student learning.

Community Partners

L.I.F.T.'s board knew schools alone could not address the issues that trauma and transience often create for low-income students, so it engaged community partners. Some partners provided services to address out-of-school challenges that affect student learning. For example, L.I.F.T. worked with a local medical provider to run a mobile medical clinic offering free immunizations, and it organized local dentists to volunteer in dental clinics. A partnership with the local housing authority resulted in a program helping L.I.F.T parents in some subsidized communities develop the skills and knowledge to advocate more effectively for their children's educational needs.

Other community partners provided school-based supports. One of L.I.F.T.'s first partners, Communities in Schools (CIS), provided case management services to students with mental health and other significant social-emotional needs. This service proved especially important because budget cuts had led to fewer counselors and social workers in L.I.F.T. schools. L.I.F.T. also engaged community volunteer programs to mentor students during school hours in its first few years. Coordinating community volunteers and time in class schedules to accommodate them taxed both school staff and student learning time, however, so L.I.F.T. phased out this mentoring approach.

I enjoy working at a L.I.F.T. school because it truly feels like a community working toward a common goal.
—L.I.F.T. elementary school teacher

L.I.F.T. held community partner organizations, especially those receiving its funding support, accountable to performance standards. True to its test and try strategy, L.I.F.T. terminated partnerships that did not produce desired results. It ultimately focused its parent and community engagement funds on community partners that provided L.I.F.T. schools with embedded social-emotional supports. After the district began funding more social workers and counselors in L.I.F.T. schools, for example, L.I.F.T.'s partnership with CIS

shifted to providing "tiered support" in L.I.F.T. schools—or specialized CIS staff dedicated to addressing a particular challenge like attendance, discipline, or family crisis. Similarly, L.I.F.T. engaged an afterschool provider specifically focused on developing social-emotional skills. Operating in L.I.F.T. schools that did not already have an afterschool program, this community partner used academic and enrichment-based activities (including music, dance, and sports) in individual and group settings to help K–5 students develop five core competencies of social-emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship skills.

As L.I.F.T. ended, the CIS and afterschool programs planned to use their own philanthropic support to sustain their involvement in L.I.F.T. schools.

School-Based Parent Engagement

By its third year, L.I.F.T. had successfully implemented several centrally coordinated L.I.F.T.-wide student supports, such as medical and dental clinics. Around this time, L.I.F.T.'s leaders also began anticipating the transition of L.I.F.T. schools back to exclusive district supervision. In response, L.I.F.T. began prioritizing efforts that made its schools the locus of parent engagement. For example, L.I.F.T. worked with schools to identify and train staff to serve as parent coordinators. When L.I.F.T. started, its schools did not have parent-teacher organizations. By the end of the 2015–16 academic year, all of its schools had established active chapters that were still operating at the end of the L.I.F.T. initiative.

Parent Empowerment

In its final years, L.I.F.T.'s parent and community engagement strategy shifted again, focusing sharply on building parents' capacity to advocate for their children's education and address the challenges that impeded their learning. Most notably, L.I.F.T. helped mobilize its schools' PTAs to form a larger advocacy coalition in West Charlotte focused on education policy decisions affecting the city's west side. The group initially responded to a new student assignment plan the district introduced in 2016, and it continues to be active as of this writing. L.I.F.T. also refreshed its approach to using technology to engage parents. Through the Civic Tech Institute (see page 28), L.I.F.T. taught parents how to use computers and connect with community resources to address their own family challenges.

L.I.F.T.'S CHALLENGES

Over its seven years, L.I.F.T. faced challenges on issues related to messaging and communication, state policy, teacher turnover, and lacking and lagging data. Some challenges were a product of the initiative's design; others L.I.F.T. expected but proved more complicated than anticipated. L.I.F.T. adjusted along the way to address these challenges as best it could; however, in many ways, it was also working against the tide.

Communicating L.I.F.T.

L.I.F.T. wanted to set aspirational goals that would inspire its schools to do everything possible to meet them, renew energy in West Charlotte, and create enthusiasm throughout Charlotte for its schools. But L.I.F.T.'s branding around goals and the amount of funding invested had unintended consequences, feeding misperceptions about L.I.F.T. and a local narrative of criticism and failure. At the same time, its stated objectives and design complicated its ability to communicate progress, and its efforts to communicate with several key groups were inconsistent.

Public misperceptions

When the L.I.F.T. initiative was announced, public attention focused largely on the tremendous amount of philanthropic dollars generated. Though the funds amounted to only about $1,000 per student per year, the $55 million figure created unrealistic expectations that L.I.F.T. could fund "whatever it took" to improve student outcomes and questions about the district's ability to sustain efforts when private funding went away.

L.I.F.T. struggled to combat skepticism and mistrust about its motivations as well. Previous district-led initiatives to improve low-performing schools resulted in school closures and new school assignments primarily affecting low-income and minority students on Charlotte's west side that left many in the city's black community angry and resentful that education reform was done to, not with, them. L.I.F.T. did not want to repeat the district's mistakes, but at the same time, its leaders were not willing to watch more generations of students fail in school while waiting for Charlotte to address the factors that contributed to the achievement gap—such as segregated housing patterns and neighborhood-based school assignment plans.

Communicating progress

L.I.F.T.'s design complicated leaders' ability to clearly identify and share successes. Its implementation of multiple, intertwined initiatives did not make it easy to evaluate and clearly isolate cause and effect. In addition, L.I.F.T. consisted of just a small sample of schools (including only one high school), and it engaged several partners to execute different combinations of strategies at each school, further complicating evaluation. Meanwhile, some strategies were too new to have an empirical base of comparative data (for example, Opportunity Culture) and others (such as increasing access to technology and engaging community organizations in the L.I.F.T. initiative) lacked readily identifiable measures.

Some strategies were not completely aligned with L.I.F.T.'s 90-90-90 goals either. For example, L.I.F.T. spent more of its budget on strategies for elementary schools than secondary, based on its assumption that increased school readiness and achievement in earlier grades would lead to stronger achievement in high school. But the full impact of those investments would take more time than L.I.F.T. had. Students beginning with L.I.F.T. in elementary school would not graduate from WCHS until *after* the L.I.F.T. initiative ended, and so would have no effect on L.I.F.T. achieving its 90 percent graduation rate.

The L.I.F.T. board commissioned Research for Action to help assess its impact and tell its story. The firm conducted a five-year evaluation (the original L.I.F.T. timeframe) and submitted annual reports to the board. In so doing, it collected and analyzed quantitative data on student behavioral and academic outcomes and qualitative data regarding principal and teacher perceptions of L.I.F.T.'s strategic implementation and outcomes. But Research for Action faced the same challenges as L.I.F.T. and could not peg cause and effect to a specific strategy within L.I.F.T.'s four strategic pillars.

Addressing key audiences

Meanwhile, L.I.F.T.'s communication strategy inconsistently targeted several critical audiences who stood to benefit from the initiative, including parents, CMS central office staff, and teachers and leaders in other CMS schools.

Despite L.I.F.T.'s early efforts to publicize its work in West Charlotte, anecdotal evidence suggests that it effectively tapped its parent audience only after 2016, when it had established PTAs in all of its schools. Further, though L.I.F.T.'s leaders were in close communication with funders and school staff, their communication strategy generally overlooked CMS central office staff (outside of the district's top leadership team) and teachers and leaders in other schools who would potentially benefit from replication of L.I.F.T. practices.

Data Challenges

Data challenges further complicated L.I.F.T.'s ability to tell its story. L.I.F.T. often lacked critical data when it needed it, and adjustments to state measures for student performance and graduation rates effectively changed the yardsticks that L.I.F.T. had set to measure its 90-90-90 goals.

Lagging data

Given the test-and-try approach, L.I.F.T.'s funders wanted to focus investments on strategies that were having an impact. But L.I.F.T. often lacked timely access to data for evaluation. For example, L.I.F.T. relied heavily on scores from the state's end-of-year standardized tests to assess its strategies and determine how to proceed. But results from state tests were available only once a year, and usually well after the end of the school year. In one such instance, the L.I.F.T. board looked during the spring at how to refine the year-round calendar strategy for the next year. But without state test data for measuring the strategy's impact, the board hesitated to make changes. Similarly, CMS did not have a student-level learning growth metric that would allow it to determine how much growth students made each year, though the initiative aimed for 90 percent of students to make at least a year's worth of growth each year.

Moving academic targets

At the same time, the state assessments used to measure proficiency changed during the L.I.F.T. initiative, as did the cut scores for proficiency and the way the state calculated the graduation rate.

Beginning in 2012–13, the state began using new annual standardized assessments aligned to the Common Core for State Standards. These more rigorous tests caused student proficiency rates to drop across the state that year. Then the following year, the state changed the scale used to measure student achievement, adding a new achievement level and new college- and career-readiness standards. This change lowered the bar for demonstrating on-grade level proficiency but raised it for demonstrating preparedness for success after high school[7] (for more on student performance outcomes, see "Academic Outcomes," page 40). Complicating matters for L.I.F.T. further, teaching standards also changed twice during the initiative's seven-year timeline, once when the state implemented national Common Core State Standards, and again in 2018–19 when its own North Carolina Standard Course of Study went into effect. These changes meant teachers had to make significant instructional adjustments *in addition to* adapting to new roles and responsibilities and implementing other L.I.F.T. strategies.

Similarly, changes in the state's rules for calculating graduation rates raised the bar just as West Charlotte High School was reaching L.I.F.T.'s 90 percent graduation benchmark.[8] Beginning in 2018, the state began requiring high schools to count all seniors who completed their fourth year of high school at that school as graduates or non-graduates; previously, students who had transferred to a new school did not count. For WCHS, which experiences a high level of student mobility, that meant counting as non-graduates students who started their senior year at the school already under-credited or off track to graduate in four years, even though WCHS had played no prior role in their schooling. In addition, high schools had to count students not attending their school if the school could not document where those students were, which also caused WCHS's graduation rate to dip, as students in high-mobility schools often suddenly move away. WCHS's graduation rate fell from 88 percent in 2017 to 73 percent in 2018. Seven other CMS high schools, including four other Title I high schools, also experienced graduation rate drops of more than 10 percentage points as a result of the new methodology.[9]

Funding Trade-Offs

The original $55 million raised to support the L.I.F.T. initiative seemed to be a tremendous amount of money. In practice, however, it amounted to about $1,000 per student, per year. With finite funds to execute an ambitious and multifaceted school improvement strategy, the L.I.F.T. governing board always faced funding choices.

For starters, L.I.F.T.'s governing board had to decide how to divide the funds across the four pillars. It planned to make the largest investments in the talent and time pillars (see Figure 4, page 36). The technology budget was the next largest. L.I.F.T. allocated the fewest funds to support parent and community engagement, in part because it intended to rely heavily on community partners to support that work.

L.I.F.T.'s funders also wanted to avoid a funding cliff at the end of the initiative and make it possible for CMS to absorb successful L.I.F.T. programs into the district budget. Thus, they intentionally front-loaded the L.I.F.T. budget for the early years, with the amount of funding decreasing over time (see Figure 5, page 37). Finite funds coupled with attention to sustainability planning meant that the L.I.F.T. funders had relatively little flexibility to shift funds or support promising practices that would emerge in later years without also scaling down other efforts. As one example, allocating more funding for social-emotional supports in L.I.F.T.'s later years as student needs were intensifying would have meant shifting funds that supported successful talent strategies.
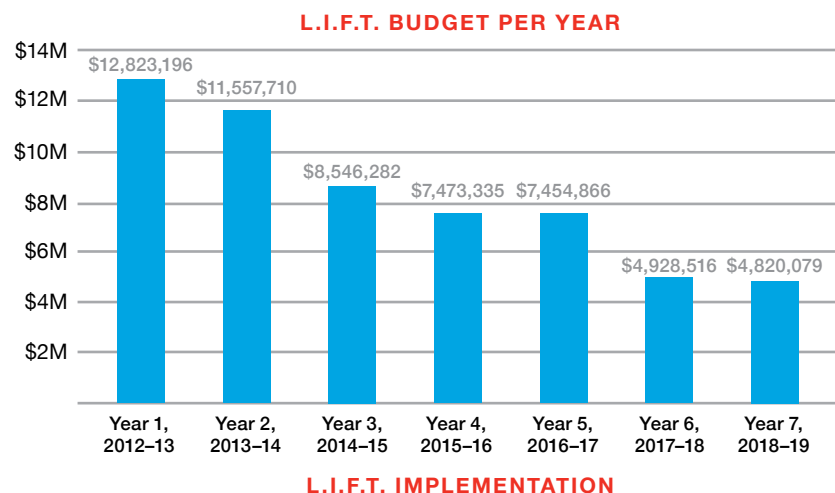
L.I.F.T.'s budget also forced it to have a centralized staff too small for all the work planned. The board relied on Denise Watts, a highly capable and successful administrator and leader, to shoulder responsibility for the initiative. At the beginning, Watts was charged with planning and executing a team's worth of work, but she did not have a full central leadership team. Then over time, L.I.F.T. garnered national interest, and Watts was responsible for responding to requests to learn more about L.I.F.T. in addition to all the usual demands of attending to funders, partners, schools, and community members. L.I.F.T.'s central office also experienced numerous staff transitions, causing Watts and the members of her team who remained to invest valuable time in hiring and

Figure 4. Project L.I.F.T. Budget Allocations, 2011–12 to 2018–19

	Year 1, 2012–13	Year 2, 2013–14	Year 3, 2014–15	Year 4, 2015–16	Year 5, 2016–17	Year 6, 2017–18	Year 7, 2018–19
Operations	$445,890 (3%)	$499,445 (4%)	$388,677 (5%)	$582,983 (8%)	$500,111 (7%)	$288,810 (6%)	$294,095 (6%)
Talent	$ 5,678,937 (44%)	$3,939,396 (34%)	$2,757,401 (32%)	2,684,547 (36%)	$2,939,500 (39%)	$1,824,302 (37%)	$1,332,530 (28%)
Time	$3,094,734 (24%)	$4,901,150 (42%)	$3,961,907 (46%)	$2,930,607 (39%)	$2,839,551 (38%)	$2,019,700 (41%)	$2,154,000 (45%)
Technology	$2,099,886 (16%)	$1,150,000 (10%)	$367,866 (4%)	$434,204 (6%)	$232,090 (3%)	$212,090 (4%)	$229,840 (5%)
Parent & Community Engagement	$1,306,249 (10%)	$882,719 (8%)	$798,431 (9%)	$601,994 (8%)	$643,614 (9%)	$563,614 (11%)	$769,614 (16%)
Other Grants	$197,500 (2%)	$185,000 (2%)	$272,000 (3%)	$239,000 (3%)	$300,000 (4%)	$20,000 (0%)	$40,000 (1%)
TOTAL	$12,823,196	$11,557,710	$ 8,546,282	$7,473,335	$7,454,866	$4,928,516	$4,820,079

Note: Percentages represent the percentage of the total budget in the given year.

Figure 5. Project L.I.F.T. Budget, 2011–12 to 2018–19

L.I.F.T. BUDGET PER YEAR

$14M			
$12M			
$10M			
$8M			
$6M			
$4M			
$2M			

$12,823,196
$11,557,710
$8,546,282
$7,473,335 $7,454,866
$4,928,516 $4,820,079

Year 1, 2012–13　Year 2, 2013–14　Year 3, 2014–15　Year 4, 2015–16　Year 5, 2016–17　Year 6, 2017–18　Year 7, 2018–19

L.I.F.T. IMPLEMENTATION

training new staff. In hindsight, the L.I.F.T. budget could not support all the activities under each pillar and a staff large enough to reflect the specialized skills required at various stages of implementation.

Staff and Leadership Transitions

Teacher and administrator turnover is often high in urban, high-need schools,[10] but it was extreme during the L.I.F.T. initiative—in part a victim of its own success in identifying burgeoning talent. More than 55 L.I.F.T. teachers, assistant principals, and principals were promoted to leadership positions within and outside of the district. Further, about a dozen L.I.F.T. central staff members left over the course of the initiative. Some moved on to other leadership opportunities, while some chose to leave as L.I.F.T.'s strategic approach—and the skills required of staff—shifted over time.

With every person who departed, L.I.F.T. lost institutional knowledge and relationships developed and nurtured over time. From a funding perspective,

these transitions undermined the financial investment made developing the capacity of individuals. From a leadership perspective, every staff transition slowed progress; successors lost valuable time rebuilding relationships and getting up to speed, while the leaders who stayed, like L.I.F.T. director Denise Watts, had to stretch their administrative capacity to train new staff while continuing all their other functions. High staff turnover at the L.I.F.T. central office and its schools even created implementation dips—periods when the initiative did not seem to be progressing—to varying degrees over the course of the L.I.F.T. initiative.

In addition, the CMS school board changed chairs four times in L.I.F.T.'s seven years, while CMS went through five superintendents (including four in the first four years). Superintendent changes at the district level tested the L.I.F.T. public-private partnership. It weathered the first four changes largely because Ann Clark, CMS's chief academic officer and eventual superintendent, consistently engaged with L.I.F.T., helping to maintain continuity and the district's commitment to the initiative. But her retirement in 2016, coinciding with L.I.F.T.'s originally planned conclusion, meant that planning for L.I.F.T.'s sustainability would occur with a district leader with no connection to or investment in the initiative.

And as is often the case, the change in district leadership meant new policies. When Clayton Wilcox took the helm of CMS in 2017, he changed the district's organization, and incorporated L.I.F.T. schools into a new learning community, or sub-district, that included 19 other Title I schools, in addition to the 10 schools L.I.F.T. already served.[11] In L.I.F.T.'s final two years, the funders felt compelled to serve all 29 schools in the learning community, stretching its already declining budget.

Sustainability Planning

From the start, L.I.F.T.'s funders envisioned that CMS would apply what it learned from L.I.F.T. to other district schools. They also made sure to collaborate with the district to research and develop the L.I.F.T. strategy and ensure

that it aligned with broader district goals, so that CMS leadership would be invested in its success. Early replication of L.I.F.T.'s signature talent strategy, Opportunity Culture, in other Title I schools attested to the district's mutual commitment.

With Ann Clark's retirement and the appointment of a new superintendent in 2016, the L.I.F.T. funders decided to extend L.I.F.T. for two years in an attempt to help smooth the transition and increase the likelihood that CMS would continue successful L.I.F.T. programs. Though the new administration valued many L.I.F.T. initiatives, it became evident that they would compete with new priorities in the budgeting process. Further, the autonomies allowing L.I.F.T. to try new strategies also made it more difficult for the district to continue them as a regular district practice. For example, L.I.F.T. had its own practices for recruiting candidates and compensating Opportunity Culture teacher-leaders. When CMS replicated Opportunity Culture in non-L.I.F.T. schools, it did so under its own personnel and compensation policies.

As the end of L.I.F.T. approached, CMS took steps to continue Opportunity Culture, merging it with the CMS version called Success by Design under one set of aligned personnel and compensation policies. But that process was difficult, and L.I.F.T. had only verbal assurances from the district that it would continue to support other successful initiatives, including graduation academies, community partnerships supporting social-emotional services, and the Civic Tech Institute. Questions lingered regarding how L.I.F.T. staff with knowledge about L.I.F.T. practices and policies would be transferred back to sole district supervision.

Working Against the Tide

Factors beyond its control—including the state's low teacher pay, worsening poverty in Charlotte, and high student mobility in the L.I.F.T. learning community—made L.I.F.T.'s already challenging work even more challenging.

Teacher pay

From the beginning, L.I.F.T. faced an uphill marketing and recruitment battle on teacher pay. In 2001–02, North Carolina ranked 20th among states for average teacher pay.[12] But the state fell to 49th in 2014, with teachers paid nearly $14,000 below the national average of $58,486.[13] Legislative policy changes affecting teacher compensation and curriculum further damaged North Carolina's reputation among educators. For example, in 2013 the N.C. General Assembly enacted a new law eliminating teacher tenure and automatic pay increases for teachers with advanced degrees.[14] Both the state's low pay and negative attention caused L.I.F.T. to abandon its out-of-state recruiting efforts.

Intensifying effects of poverty

L.I.F.T. targeted West Charlotte because of its schools' and community's high needs. But within L.I.F.T.'s timeline, poverty in the West Charlotte corridor intensified. A 2013 Harvard/UC-Berkeley study ranked Charlotte last for economic mobility out of the country's 50 largest cities, finding that a child living in Charlotte has less than a 5 percent chance of rising from the bottom fifth to the top fifth income bracket—less than the average of any developed country studied.[15] Furthermore, a locally led opportunity task force illuminated the growth and increasing poverty of a "crescent of lower-opportunity neighborhoods of color" that wraps around the urban center of Charlotte, including West Charlotte.[16]

As the economic conditions in West Charlotte worsened, the physical, social-emotional, and behavioral needs of students and their families grew. L.I.F.T. and its primary school-based partner, Communities in Schools (CIS), were making progress establishing specialized student support systems in schools. Ultimately, however, the need seemed to outpace L.I.F.T.'s ability to provide enough support even with many of the right services in place.

Leaky feeder pattern

L.I.F.T. operated under the assumption that consistent and sustained supports for students in high-need, low-performing schools would lead to better

performance, and that increased school readiness and achievement in earlier grades would build on itself, leading to continually stronger achievement through high school. Accordingly, the L.I.F.T. learning community was based on a feeder pattern in which students attending L.I.F.T. elementary schools progressed to L.I.F.T. middle schools, then West Charlotte High School.

But the feeder pattern "leaked." Some elementary students went to non-L.I.F.T. middle schools and then West Charlotte High School. Other students became part of L.I.F.T. for the first time in middle school. At the same time, students in the West Charlotte corridor were highly transient due to factors associated with poverty. The impact was staggering: Only 50 percent of students in grades 3 through 8 who enrolled in a L.I.F.T. school in 2012–13 were still in a L.I.F.T. school two years later.[17] Moreover, just 37 percent of eighth-graders who attended L.I.F.T. schools in 2012–13 enrolled at West Charlotte High School as ninth-graders in 2013–14.[18] Neither CMS nor the L.I.F.T. governing board fully understood the extent of the "leaks" until L.I.F.T.'s second year of implementation.[19] For the L.I.F.T. funders, attrition from middle school to high school represented a 50 to 60 percent loss on every dollar invested in those lower grades.

L.I.F.T.'S IMPACT

L.I.F.T.'s leaders wanted to inspire everyone involved—funders, district leaders, principals, teachers, and even custodial staff—to push hard to improve student outcomes. They also wanted schools to work toward the same goals they would want for their own children. So they aimed high: Within five years, L.I.F.T. aspired to:

- increase the graduation rate to 90 percent;
- have 90 percent of L.I.F.T. students proficient in reading and math; and
- have 90 percent of student gain more than one year's learning growth in one year's time.

In the end, L.I.F.T. fell short of its 90-90-90 goals, but it left a legacy on which the district could build. L.I.F.T. left its mark on students and families in the West Charlotte community and the teachers and leaders who participated in its programs. Moreover, the L.I.F.T. strategies that CMS sustains and replicates elsewhere in the district will continue to expand the initiative's impact. L.I.F.T. also stamped its footprint on philanthropy, demonstrating the possibility of a new way for public and private organizations in Charlotte and across the U.S. to work together to improve public schools.

The best thing about Project L.I.F.T. is how student attitudes about achievement have changed.—L.I.F.T. high school teacher

Academic Outcomes

L.I.F.T. nearly reached its graduation goal (see Figure 6, page 41), though it fell far short of the others. West Charlotte High School's graduation rate improved from 51 percent in 2010, the year before L.I.F.T. began, to 88 percent in 2017, the last year the state used the same formula to calculate graduation rates. (see "Moving academic targets," page 34).[20] The change was impressive; WCHS's graduation rate improved nearly 40 percentage points. In addition, the percentage of rising ninth-graders on track to graduate increased from 52 percent to 73 percent over the same period (see Figure 7, page 41).[21]

Student proficiency, however, was a different story. L.I.F.T. schools consistently underperformed the state proficiency rate on end-of-year assessments before L.I.F.T. launched, and student proficiency has not improved (see Figure 8, page 42). But as previously discussed, changes to the state end-of-year test and the way the state measures proficiency means that rates in earlier years are not directly comparable to those in later years (see "Moving academic targets," page 34).

Since 2012–13, the state has also calculated a growth score for each school.[23] Depending on students' prior-year performance on the state exam, the state determines how much growth students should make in the current year, based on historical data. Schools receive one of three scores—did not meet, met, or exceeded. Though L.I.F.T. schools exceeded growth *less often* than CMS schools over the course of L.I.F.T.'s timeline, they exceeded growth *more often* than schools across the state, and were less likely than schools statewide not to meet growth (see Figure 9 and Figure 10, page 43). Moreover, West Charlotte High School posted particularly strong growth results. It exceeded growth one year and met growth every other year of L.I.F.T.'s implementation. It also moved off the state's list of low-performing schools in 2017 (see "West Charlotte High School's Transformation," page 44).

Figure 6. West Charlotte High School graduation rate, 2010–18

	Pre-L.I.F.T.			L.I.F.T. Implementation					
	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17*	2017–18*
Graduation rate	51%	54%	56%	71%	78%	77%	86%	88%	73%

Source: Project L.I.F.T.
*Beginning in 2018, the state changed its rules for calculating graduation rates. See "Moving academic targets," page 34.

Figure 7. Percent of West Charlotte High School 9th-grade students on track to graduate after 9th grade

	Pre-L.I.F.T.	L.I.F.T. Implementation[22]				
	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17
L.I.F.T. students on track to graduate	51.7%	71.0%	66.4%	70.2%	68.3%	73.0%
Non-L.I.F.T. CMS students on track to graduate	71.4%	78.0%	78.5%	80.1%	82.7%	83.2%

Source: Research for Action. (2018). *Project L.I.F.T.: Year five student outcomes memo.* Philadelphia, PA: Author. Retrieved from http://www.projectL.I.F.T.charlotte.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/L.I.F.T.-Year-5-student-outcomes-memo-and-executive-summary.pdf

Figure 8. Percentage of Students Proficient on State Assessments in L.I.F.T. Schools and Statewide, 2012–13 through 2017–18

			L.I.F.T. Implementation					
		2011–12	**2012–13***	**2013–14****	**2014–15**	**2015–16**	**2016–17**	**2017–18**
Grades 3 through 8 End-of-Grade (EOG) Assessments								
Reading	L.I.F.T.	48%	19%	33%	32%	33%	31%	28%
	Statewide	71%	44%	57%	56%	57%	58%	57%
Math	L.I.F.T.	65%	22%	30%	29%	32%	32%	32%
	Statewide	83%	44%	51%	52%	55%	55%	56%
Science	L.I.F.T.	54%	36%	53%	58%	58%	54%	51%
	Statewide	77%	52%	68%	69%	73%	73%	72%
West Charlotte High School End-of-Course (EOC) Assessments[24]								
Reading[25]	L.I.F.T.	56%	24%	36%	34%	34%	40%	27%
	Statewide	83%	51%	62%	60%	59%	61%	60%
Math[26]	L.I.F.T.	34%	10%	28%	29%	35%	24%	27%
	Statewide	79%	36%	60%	60%	61%	64%	57%
Science (Biology I)	L.I.F.T.	42%	18%	21%	24%	30%	37%	40%
	Statewide	83%	46%	54%	54%	56%	56%	58%

Source

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction: Accountability Services Division, *Accountability and testing results*.
Available from http://www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/reporting/

Notes

 * North Carolina began using new end-of year state assessments in the 2012–13 school year, resulting in lower proficiency statewide.

** North Carolina began using a new five-level proficiency scale in 2013–14, which effectively lowered the on-grade-level proficiency
   thresholds for students across all assessments.

Figure 9. Overall School Growth Results for L.I.F.T. Schools, 2012–13 through 2017–18

	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18
Allenbrook Elementary	Met	Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met
Ashley Park School	Met	Met	Not Met	Exceeded	Met	Met
Bruns Academy	Met	Met	Not Met	Met	Met	Met
Druid Hills Academy	Exceeded	Exceeded	Not Met	Met	Met	Met
Ranson Middle	Exceeded	Met	Exceeded	Exceeded	Met	Not Met
Statesville Elementary	Met	Exceeded	Exceeded	Exceeded	Not Met	Met
Thomasboro Academy	Exceeded	Met	Exceeded	Exceeded	Not Met	Exceeded
Walter Byers Elementary	Exceeded	Exceeded	Not Met	Met	Met	Exceeded
West Charlotte High	Met	Met	Met	Met	Exceeded	Met

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction growth model data

Figure 10. Cumulative school growth performance, 2012-13—2017-18

	Not Met	Met	Exceeded
L.I.F.T. schools	20%	48%	31%
CMS	20%	40%	40%
Statewide	27%	45%	28%

WEST CHARLOTTE HIGH SCHOOL'S TRANSFORMATION

West Charlotte High School (WCHS) has long been an anchor of the city's west side. Situated in the historical center of Charlotte's African-American community, West Charlotte was one of the primary institutions forming the social fabric that nurtured and supported the community.

The school gained national recognition as Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, under federal court mandate, implemented a district-wide busing plan to integrate schools in 1971.[1] It was a top performer among CMS high schools for the next two decades, but neighborhood-based school assignment plans and the district's release from court-ordered desegregation in the early 1990s unwound integration. By the 2009–10 school year, CMS schools were resegregated, with minority and low-income students concentrated in the crescent surrounding Charlotte's inner city, and white and more affluent students in suburban schools. At WCHS, the graduation rate had fallen to just 51 percent, the lowest of any CMS high schools, and nearly 90 percent of students were African-American.
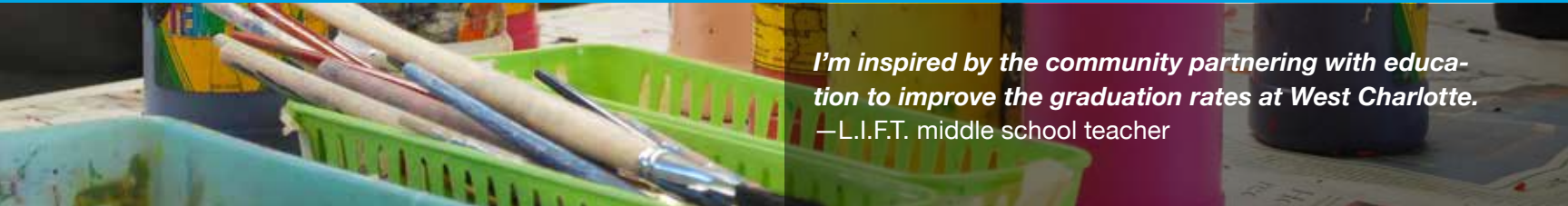
West Charlotte became the flagship of Project L.I.F.T. because of its low graduation rate. The L.I.F.T. funders believed that successes achieved in the district's most challenged schools could be replicated anywhere. At the end of the L.I.F.T. initiative, West Charlotte did not disappoint. Though work remains, the school is on a transformative path; in 2017:

- Its graduation rate reached 88 percent, just two percentage points shy of meeting L.I.F.T's 90 percent goal;
- It exceeded growth for the first time ever; and
- It moved off the state's low-performing schools list.[2]

Dr. Timisha Barnes-Jones—West Charlotte's principal and a finalist for the state principal of the year award in 2019—credits Project L.I.F.T. for creating the conditions for the changes that produced these results. The L.I.F.T. Academy, one of L.I.F.T.'s most successful innovations, helped the school address the needs of over-age and under-credited students, and in so doing helped the high school mitigate a disruptive force within it. The L.I.F.T. Academy has served over 600 students, and in its first six years graduated an average 80 percent of each cohort.[3] The academy's work with younger students—10th-graders and second semester ninth-graders who are academically at risk of not graduating with their peers—has also paid off. The percentage of LIFT first-time ninth-graders on track to graduate increased from 51.7 percent in 2011–12 (the year before L.I.F.T. started) to 73 percent in in 2016–17.[4]

L.I.F.T.'s innovative talent recruitment and retention strategies (see "Talent," page 19) helped the school make dramatic leadership and staff changes that now fosters teachers having high expectations for all students. As a result, a college-going, career-ready mentality has flourished among WCHS students. And these same students are more likely to earn scholarship grants than they would have in the years before L.I.F.T.; in 2016, they received 143 scholarships totaling nearly $4.5 million.

The changes at WCHS have rejuvenated the school's pride and renewed community support for it as well. Several well-publicized happenings illustrate the point: in 2014, the city's professional football franchise financed a new football field for the school; in 2019, when West Charlotte made it to the state basketball championship round, the NBA refurbished the school's locker room, and hundreds of West Charlotte alumni turned out for the semifinal and final games, with thousands more expressing support on social media.[5]

I'm inspired by the community partnering with education to improve the graduation rates at West Charlotte.
—L.I.F.T. middle school teacher

Positive Cumulative Effects

L.I.F.T.'s five-year evaluation offered evidence that providing sustained supports for students over time could shepherd improvements in student outcomes.[27] A longitudinal analysis comparing two cohorts of L.I.F.T. students to cohorts of non-L.I.F.T. students in CMS, who were matched for certain characteristics including demographics and academic achievement, suggested that the initiative had particular success with students who progressed through L.I.F.T. elementary and middle schools year after year.[28] More specifically, L.I.F.T.'s evaluators found that students who started at a L.I.F.T. K–5 school as third-graders in 2012–13 and remained in L.I.F.T. for five years performed significantly better than the non-L.I.F.T. comparison group on the state reading and math tests in seventh grade.[29] Students who started at L.I.F.T.'s only middle school as sixth-graders performed significantly better than the matched comparison group on the state's level 1 high school math test.[30]

Impact on School Culture

Though L.I.F.T. did not attain its academic goals, it significantly changed the learning environment in its schools. The evaluation of L.I.F.T.'s first five years found that it had a significant and positive impact on student attendance in middle and high school every year.[31] High school students participating in L.I.F.T. were also less likely to receive an out-of-school suspension,[32] and incoming ninth-graders at West Charlotte High School were less likely to experience attendance, behavioral, or academic performance challenges.[33]

Meanwhile, other L.I.F.T. data suggest that the number of classrooms considered disengaged from learning has decreased, while the percentage of students staying on task has increased since L.I.F.T.'s fourth year, when it started providing classroom teachers with "real-time" behavior management coaching.[34] Teachers' perceptions of the instructional culture at L.I.F.T. schools has also improved. L.I.F.T.'s average rating for instructional culture on an annual district-wide teacher survey increased from 6.0 to 7.2 on a 10-point rating scale between 2012–13 and 2016–17.[35]

The shift in school culture is most inspiring. Teachers are able to focus on teaching and students on learning.
—L.I.F.T. principal

Talent Pool

Talent proved to be L.I.F.T.'s most successful strategic pillar. Though teacher turnover remained a constant challenge—L.I.F.T. schools overall lost an average of 19 teachers each year[36]—L.I.F.T.'s teacher recruitment and retention strategies transformed once hard-to-staff schools into a prestigious talent pipeline. L.I.F.T. nearly eliminated teacher vacancies in its schools, instead filling them with more teachers rated as highly effective teachers.

Within a year of implementation, L.I.F.T. schools went from having as many as 40 vacancies per school at the beginning of the academic year to having

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Notes to Sidebar, page 44

1. *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, 402 U.S. 1 (1971), upheld a lower federal court's order requiring the district to use busing to integrate the district's schools.

2. In every other year of the L.I.F.T. initiative WCHS received a "met growth" rating on the state's system for measuring school growth (see "Moving academic targets," page 34).

3. Based on data from Project L.I.F.T.

4. Research for Action. (2018). *Project L.I.F.T.: Year five student outcomes memo*. Philadelphia,

PA: Research for Action. Retrieved from http://www.projectL.I.F.T.charlotte.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/L.I.F.T.-Year-5-student-outcomes-memo-and-executive-summary.pdf

5. Wertz, L. Jr. (2019, March 16). In defeat, West Charlotte's 'Lion Pride" shines through. *Charlotte Observer*. Retrieved from https://www.charlotteobserver.com/sports/high-school/article228038024.html; Louis, K. (2019, March 6). Community rallies behind West Charlotte basketball team despite controversies. *Qcitymetro*. Retrieved from https://qcitymetro.com/2019/03/06/community-rallies-behind-west-charlotte-basketball-team-despite-controversies/

almost none. Opportunity Culture positions alone drew hundreds of applications each year, topping more than 800 for 27 positions in 2014.[37] Some highly qualified applicants accepted non-Opportunity Culture positions in L.I.F.T. schools to better position themselves for future Opportunity Culture openings. The advanced career and compensation opportunities that Opportunity Culture offered attracted—and retained—not only master teachers, but also developing teachers wanting to hone their skills.

Educators in the L.I.F.T. zone are given opportunities not provided in other learning communities.
—L.I.F.T. middle school teacher

As noted in the "Challenges" section, however, L.I.F.T.'s success identifying and developing talent proved to be a double-edged sword, as other CMS schools and school districts began to look at L.I.F.T. educators for leadership candidates. More than 55 leaders and teachers in L.I.F.T. schools were promoted to a higher leadership position during the initiative, and quite a few received a second promotion as well. More than a dozen assistant principals became CMS principals, while at least eight principals were promoted to CMS learning community leadership positions. A handful of other assistant principals and principals took higher leadership positions in schools outside CMS or in national teacher support organizations. Thus, while a loss to L.I.F.T., these educators helped extend its impact by taking the expertise developed through the initiative to other CMS schools and districts.

Learning Laboratory

L.I.F.T. gave CMS the opportunity to test new strategies, with the goal of applying successful interventions district-wide. In each of the areas shown to yield the greatest return on investments—talent, time, technology, and parent and community engagement—L.I.F.T. paved the way for critical innovations.

Project L.I.F.T. understands that one size does not fit all and took the lead in trying new things and challenging the status quo.—L.I.F.T. high school teacher

Test and try

The L.I.F.T. funders knew that ultimate success could mean failing first. And in fact, L.I.F.T. did test strategies that failed to produce the desired results. But those experiences helped CMS learn what approaches would not be effective district-wide, and could point the way toward what might be effective instead. For example, L.I.F.T. tried three strategies to increase learning time for students—an extended school calendar, the graduation academy program, and tutoring. That helped it identify the challenges that CMS would have to overcome to change the way schools used time.

This "test and try" approach demonstrated that CMS can more readily sustain the flexible use of time *within* the school day than by lengthening the school calendar. So, though the CMS school board voted in L.I.F.T.'s last year to discontinue the continuous learning calendar model, the district will continue the graduation academy at West Charlotte, as well as at the four other Title I schools that adopted the concept. Similarly, L.I.F.T.'s technology hardware rollout revealed the many structural issues impeding internet connectivity in school buildings, which the district would have to address to implement its district-wide one-to-one technology initiative. L.I.F.T. also demonstrated that the school system alone cannot close the digital divide that contributes to the achievement gap, but that it would need strong partners to do so.

Successful innovations

L.I.F.T.'s learning laboratory approach also yielded successful innovations. Opportunity Culture, a school redesign effort, prioritized early and targeted recruitment of high-performing teachers who demonstrate certain key competencies; compensation and career ladders to retain excellent teachers; and

systematic professional development to improve the caliber of teachers in high-need, low-performing schools.

L.I.F.T. first implemented Opportunity Culture in four schools in 2013–14, eventually expanding the model to eight L.I.F.T. schools by 2017.[38] (Note: This report's authors are employed by Public Impact, the education and research consulting firm that developed the Opportunity Culture initiative and provided consulting services to L.I.F.T. and CMS in its implementation.) CMS replicated the model beginning in 2013–14, and as of this writing, the district has 51 non-L.I.F.T. Opportunity Culture schools. A study of schools implementing Opportunity Culture in three districts, including CMS, found that multi-classroom leaders—Opportunity Culture teachers with proven records of high student learning growth, who continue to teach in some way while leading a small teaching team through intensive support, coaching, and feedback—produced student learning gains equivalent to those of top-quartile teachers in math and nearly that in reading.[39] Teachers who were on average at the 50th percentile in student learning gains, who then joined multi-classroom leaders' teams, produced learning gains equivalent to those of teachers from the 75th to 85th percentile in math, and, in six of the seven statistical models, from 66th to 72nd percentile in reading.[40] Since L.I.F.T. began, the Opportunity Culture national initiative continues to grow, with more than 300 schools across 28 districts in nine states as of 2018–19.[41]

L.I.F.T.'s test and try approach also showed that schools can serve as hubs for engaging community partners around technology access and as portals to students' families. L.I.F.T.'s Civic Tech Institute, in particular, demonstrated how community partners can engage with schools to aid in the distribution and use of technology to support educational outcomes. Within one year, nearly 1,500 people had participated in Civic Tech Institute offerings, including more than 350 participants in 22 cohorts who completed the six-week digital inclusion class on digital literacy and received a laptop, and more than 50 families who sought help connecting to benefits and services through Charlotte Trajectory.

L.I.F.T. affirmed the importance of building schools' capacity to involve parents and give them a voice in education decisions affecting their children. L.I.F.T.'s cultivation of a network of community partners helped its schools address the out-of-school factors that distract students and families from education. Embedding community partners, such as Community in Schools, in L.I.F.T. schools helped increase their capacity to address students' social-emotional needs and the acute crises that low-income families frequently face. At the end of L.I.F.T., both CIS and the afterschool social-emotional development program were planning to use their own philanthropic support to sustain their involvement in L.I.F.T. schools. Moreover, the creation of parent-teacher associations in every L.I.F.T. school introduced a concept often taken for granted elsewhere—giving parents the means to engage at both the school and community level and participate in the decisions affecting their children's education.

District replication

CMS replicated L.I.F.T.'s most successful strategies, including:

- **Opportunity Culture.** CMS created its own version of Opportunity Culture for non-L.I.F.T. schools—Success by Design—with a dedicated human capital strategist to support Title I schools. As L.I.F.T.'s end date approached, the Opportunity Culture and Success by Design models were merged into one system under CMS with uniform operating policies. CMS also adopted L.I.F.T.'s early hiring practices and engaged some of its teacher support partners to provide professional development for principals who led Success by Design schools.
- **L.I.F.T. Academy.** Five other CMS Title I high schools adapted L.I.F.T.'s graduation academy concept beginning in 2015.[42] As of this writing, CMS is planning to sustain the model at all those schools. The district's challenge is finding funds to maintain operations—the L.I.F.T. Academy cost an average of about $8,000 per student per year.
- **Focus on feeder patterns.** CMS configured all of its learning communities (sub-districts within CMS) based on feeder patterns as L.I.F.T. had done.

- **Civic Tech Institute.** As of this writing, CMS is planning to build upon and expand the Civic Tech Institute using a two-year matching grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (see "Project L.I.F.T.'s Civic Tech Institute," page 28).
- **Social-emotional learning supports.** CMS also plans to continue Communities in Schools and afterschool programs intended to help address out-of-school factors that impede student learning (see "Parent and Community Engagement," page 30).

Influence on Philanthropy

The very creation of a public-private partnership model will be one of L.I.F.T.'s most enduring accomplishments. It represents a rare instance where foundations sought to work directly with the district and included the district's leadership as a full partner in research and planning. Though the L.I.F.T. initiative revealed cultural differences between private and public entities—for example, the private sector's nimbleness to make and act on funding decisions versus public accountability of elected leaders—it also showcased the potential of a public-private partnership to catalyze and scale up innovation.

Four aspects of this public-private partnership model proved critical:

- L.I.F.T. offered new perspectives and expertise to shape school turnarounds in CMS schools.
- L.I.F.T. provided the "risk capital" for the district to test school turnaround ideas.
- A multiyear commitment from L.I.F.T. funders provided the time needed for new ideas to take hold and develop.
- L.I.F.T.'s partnership with the district provided an opportunity for successful innovations to continue in L.I.F.T. schools and reach a broader audience over time.

The success of the L.I.F.T. public-private partnership informed the relaunch of the CMS Foundation, a nonprofit created to provide financial support for district programs and activities. Established in 2004, the foundation had served largely as a conduit for individuals and organizations wanting to contribute to CMS schools. But in 2016 the foundation reorganized to emulate the partnership between L.I.F.T. funders and the district. The foundation now works with district leaders to identify needs that may be addressed through private investments and matches them to donors' funding interests.

And the partnership's reach has gone beyond the district, affecting other Charlotte philanthropic initiatives. Read Charlotte, which focuses on early literacy, and the Leading on Opportunity Council, which aims to improve the economic mobility of Charlotte's low-income residents, have adopted similar governance structures and collective impact approaches. In both cases, private funders are providing seed money to develop or implement new, innovative approaches to a community-wide challenge. Funds are then being administered outside of public governance agencies to preserve the private sector's administrative and financial nimbleness. But both initiatives have involved city and county government leaders in their oversight structures to facilitate implementation of publicly supported—and funded—responses to the problems they are addressing.

LESSONS LEARNED

Seven years of work have yielded important insights about what it takes to close achievement gaps and improve outcomes for students in high-need, low-performing district schools.

Public-private partnerships can successfully catalyze and scale up innovation in public schools. Though the idea of public-private partnership is not new, L.I.F.T. offers a new proof point for the potential of private philanthropy to work with a school district to seed and grow innovation. L.I.F.T. demonstrated the impact that a collection of funders can have: Together, the L.I.F.T. funders raised more than any single funder has offered the district on its own. Those funds—along with a commitment that funders would actively support the initiative for five years—provided the space needed to experiment with several new strategies and observe which among them worked and were worth expanding to more schools. In addition, the initiative's dual governance ensured that the district and funders were equally invested in L.I.F.T.'s oversight and ultimate success.

Multiyear initiatives should anticipate and protect against changes in leadership. Continuing and sustaining new programs and practices in district schools is challenging even when working with the same district leaders. It becomes all the more challenging when those leaders leave. But such changes, and the concomitant shifts in strategic priorities that so often accompany them, are inevitable in large urban districts. Understanding this dynamic, the L.I.F.T. funders took steps to protect their investment. But the continuity and replication of L.I.F.T. successes still came into question as CMS superintendents came and went, leaving funders to wonder what they could have done differently to ensure sustainability. The L.I.F.T. experience suggests several possibilities:

• *Make your expectations crystal clear.* Though the L.I.F.T. funders had a memorandum of understanding with the district, its brevity reflected the high level of trust the partners had developed as they crafted the initiative's strategic framework together. With a more detailed agreement outlining who was responsible for assessing progress and for sustainability

planning, the funders may have been better able to hold new district leaders accountable for continuing to implement the L.I.F.T. vision.

- *Look for opportunities to cultivate deeper relationships across the district.* As a special initiative, L.I.F.T. operated in semi-isolation from the rest of the district with its central office leadership reporting to the district's top leaders. Deeper relationships with district staff across key departments or with an office of innovation, which CMS did not have, can help private partners navigate the bureaucratic divide between top district leadership and lower-level departments, ensuring access to district decision-makers on the day-to-day matters even when top-level leaders change.
- *Expand the partnership circle.* Including civic organizations (such as public agencies and advocates) and city and county government representatives in decisions enhances accountability for all partners, and also creates opportunities to attract additional public dollars.
- *Build parents' and community expectations.* Parents can be formidable education advocates. When invested in what is happening in their children's schools, they use their voices to protect their interests. Clearly communicating and directly engaging with parents and community members in a public-private initiative is another way to expand the partnership circle and enhance accountability.

Effective talent strategies produce a deep (and regenerative) bench. School turnarounds are hard, and staff turnover is not uncommon as some teachers and leaders resist change or burn out. L.I.F.T. anticipated turnover among its leaders and took steps to cultivate a deep bench. However, its success cultivating talent proved to be a double-edged sword as successful teachers and leaders moved to new leadership positions in CMS and other districts.

Nonetheless, L.I.F.T. managed to keep replenishing its bench, proving that treating teachers and leaders like professionals is one key to recruiting and developing them in high-need schools. L.I.F.T.'s success rested in offering teachers a voice in and responsibility for the decisions that affect them and their students, recognizing them for doing their jobs well, providing high-quality professional development and coaching to help them become better at what they do, and providing opportunities to advance in their careers. Moreover, L.I.F.T. showed that even hard-to-staff schools can build a strong and sustainable leader pipeline when they treat their teachers and leaders right.

Effective communication considers the message *and* the audience. The L.I.F.T. initiative began with great fanfare and ended with a series of reports (including this one) summarizing what it had done. L.I.F.T. struggled to tell its story between the beginning and the end, however, because it often lacked the language—and the data—to do so. L.I.F.T.'s experience demonstrates the importance of setting milestones along the way to ambitious goals and identifying metrics for those milestones. Interim goals build momentum on which to reach the big wins. They also provide evidence for the need to make changes along the way.

And L.I.F.T.'s experience underscores the importance of identifying and communicating with all crucial audiences. The L.I.F.T. governing board consistently updated its funders, while its central office kept in close contact with schools and staff. But L.I.F.T. struggled to maintain regular dialogue with two key audiences. L.I.F.T. tried various strategies to connect to and communicate with the West Charlotte neighbors its schools served. But anecdotal evidence suggests that L.I.F.T. did not effectively engage its families in its story until it established parent-teacher associations in every school. After PTAs made schools the locus of communication, L.I.F.T. squarely targeted its methods and messages at its intended audience, parents of L.I.F.T. students. Even if they could not say what the L.I.F.T. strategy was for changing student and school performance, parents became an audience to the changes happening in their school.

L.I.F.T.'s leaders also struggled to adequately communicate the initiative, its progress, and expectations for the future with CMS central staff and school leaders outside of the L.I.F.T. learning community—the two groups ultimately

responsible for sustaining and expanding the initiative's successes. L.I.F.T. might have had greater success replicating its practices district-wide had its partners worked to develop a system for sharing with district staff—including teachers and leaders in other schools—the work occurring in L.I.F.T. schools, explaining how it would one day benefit all CMS schools.

Strategies that focus on working *with* parents rather than doing things *for* them are most sustainable. L.I.F.T. tried a range of strategies to win over parents and community members. Though the full impact of its parent engagement work remains to be seen, the early evidence suggests that the most successful strategies will be those that empower parents to be active participants in their students' schools and equip them with skills that help their children learn and help parents serve as student advocates. The sustained activity of PTAs established in every L.I.F.T. school and the continuation of the Civic Tech Institute provide two such examples.

School improvement efforts are more likely to have a lasting impact when a community also addresses the challenges associated with race, poverty, and equity. Poverty intensified in Charlotte during the L.I.F.T. initiative. As a result, schools faced increasingly complex student needs that only fueled already-stubborn achievement gaps. L.I.F.T. funders began with a commitment to ensure that students at high-need schools have the same access to educational opportunity as students at better-resourced schools.

That meant "meeting students where they are" and providing differentiated supports according to student and school needs. It also meant providing wraparound supports for students and families to address external factors that impede student learning.

Yet the services and supports L.I.F.T. provided were not enough to overcome the wave of challenges its students faced. Its successes and shortcomings both underscored the external factors that distract from learning—factors that do not stop at the schoolhouse door. In a nod to this, community leaders formed a citywide task force in 2015—with the support of many L.I.F.T. funders—to examine the conditions that depress the city's economic mobility, and acknowledged the fundamental role of K–12 schools to improve education outcomes and opportunities for all students. But it went a step beyond by calling on civic leaders and decisionmakers to address the policies and systemic inequities that drive disparities among schools and students, and on community-based organizations to support families and students in addressing the out-of-school factors that impede student learning. Consequently, the Leading on Opportunity Council, established in 2017 to implement the task force's recommendations, is focused on addressing factors that contribute to negative outcomes for the city's poorest children and families—for example, lack of access to high-quality early care and education, college and career pathways, affordable housing, and segregated neighborhoods—and disproportionately affect people of color.

CONCLUSION

Project L.I.F.T. had lofty goals: Within five years, 90 percent of West Charlotte High School students would graduate; 90 percent of students in L.I.F.T. schools would be proficient in reading and math; and 90 percent of students in L.I.F.T. schools would achieve more than one year's learning growth in one year's time. L.I.F.T.'s leaders endeavored for seven years to achieve these goals, though in the end they fell short.

Nonetheless, L.I.F.T. left a legacy of innovation and learning instructive for a district grappling to achieve equity for all students. CMS recognizes that "in some instances, equity means giving those with less more: more time for learning, more highly effective teachers to reduce learning gaps . . ." and that "[e]ach student's needs may be different, but those needs should be met at every school in CMS." How CMS applies the lessons learned from L.I.F.T. to this definition of equity remains an open question.

Beyond Charlotte, L.I.F.T. is a model of how private foundations can work with public school districts to catalyze innovation to benefit all students. The L.I.F.T. public-private partnership illuminates the commitment and investment required of many community partners to turn around low-performing schools. Seeing other school districts adopt L.I.F.T. practices will only further its legacy.

Notes

1. Project L.I.F.T. originally included nine schools: West Charlotte High School, Allenbrook Elementary School, Ashley Park PreK–8 School, Bruns Academy, Druid Hills Academy, Ranson Middle School, Statesville Road Elementary School, Thomasboro Academy, and Walter G. Byers School. Oakdale Elementary became part of the L.I.F.T. Learning Community in 2016. In 2018, CMS incorporated the L.I.F.T. Learning Community into Central 1 Learning Community, a new sub-district combining the 10 L.I.F.T. schools with 19 other Title I schools located in and around Charlotte's urban core.

2. For a detailed account of Project L.I.F.T.'s genesis, see Kim, J., & Ellison, S. (2015). *The Project L.I.F.T. story: Early lessons from a public-private education turnaround initiative.* Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact. Retrieved from http://www.projectliftcharlotte.org/wp-content/up-loads/2015/12/Public-Impact-Early-Lessons-Full-Report.pdf

3. Foxx served on the L.I.F.T. governing board until his appointment as secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation in 2013. He was not replaced on the board.

4. School board engagement in L.I.F.T. was so high that school board members policed their own attendance to avoid exceeding the number who could be present at a meeting before triggering open meeting requirements.

5. Based on data from Project L.I.F.T.

6. Based on data from Project L.I.F.T.

7. See also: Public Impact: Kim, J., & Ellison, S. (2015). *The Project L.I.F.T. story.*

8. Pursuant to the definition of the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate in Section 8101 (20 U.S.C. 7801) of the Every Student Succeeds Act, North Carolina changed its "business rules" for calculating its four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. See N.C. Department of Public Instruction. (n.d.). Calculating the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate requirements and business rules. Retrieved from http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/reporting/2018/documentation/business-rules/cohort-grad.pdf

9. Helms, A. D. (2018, September 5). Grad rates plummet at several CMS high schools. Here's what it all means. *Charlotte Observer.* Retrieved from https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/education/article217798175.html

10. NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. (n.d.) Keeping the teachers: The problem of high turnover in urban schools. New York University. Retrieved from https://teachereducation.steinhardt.nyu.edu/high-teacher-turnover/

11. The Project L.I.F.T. initiative originally included nine schools: West Charlotte High School, Allenbrook Elementary School, Ashley Park PreK–8 School, Bruns Academy, Druid Hills Academy, Ranson Middle School, Statesville Road Elementary School, Thomasboro Academy, and Walter G. Byers School. Oakdale Elementary moved into the L.I.F.T. Learning Community in 2016.

12. North Carolina Association of Educators. (2013). Trends in average teacher salaries, United States and North Carolina, 1982–83 through 2012–13. Retrieved from http://www.ncae.org/wp-content/uploads/Trends-in-Avg-Teacher-salary-82-83-to-12-13-2-14-2013.pdf

13. National Education Association. (2015). *Rankings and estimates: Rankings of the states 2014 and estimates of school statistics 2015.* Retrieved from http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA_Rankings_And_Estimates-2015-03-11a.pdf

14. See N.C. Session Law 2013-360 (SB 402). Teachers who had already earned a master's degree or who had begun a master's program prior to July 1, 2013, or whose job requires a master's degree or higher would receive a salary supplement for holding an advanced degree.

15. Chetty, R., Hendren, N., Kline, P., & Saez, E. (2014). *Where is the land of opportunity? The geography of intergenerational mobility in the United States.* Retrieved from https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/hendren/files/mobility_geo.pdf

16. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force. (2017). *The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force report.* Retrieved from https://www.fftc.org/sites/default/files/2018-05/LeadingOnOpportunity_Report.pdf

17. Norton, M., & Piccinino, K. (2014). *Project LIFT: Year two report.* Philadelphia, PA: Research for Action. Retrieved from https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B4HdLvUXv8hlc0k1akVPMUN1SHM/view

18. Norton, M. & Piccinino, K. (2014). *Project LIFT: Year two report.*

19. L.I.F.T.'s year two evaluation report illuminated the magnitude of attrition that occurred at several transition points in the L.I.F.T. feeder pattern. See pp. 10–12, Norton, M., & Piccinino, K. (2014). *Project LIFT: Year two report.*

20. West Charlotte High School's graduation rate was 73 percent in 2018, the first year that a change in the state policy for calculating graduation rate was applied and the last year of available data at the time of this report's publication. Beginning in 2018, the state required high schools to count all seniors who completed their fourth year at that school as graduates or non-graduates. The change required schools to include students who started their senior year midyear at West Charlotte under-credited or off track to graduate in four years, as well as any students not attending school if the school could not document where those students were.

21. L.I.F.T. commissioned Research for Action to conduct a five-year evaluation of the initiative beginning in 2012–13, its first year of implementation. The L.I.F.T. governing board did not continue the evaluation when it extended the initiative for two additional years. See: Research for Action. (2018). *Project L.I.F.T.: Year five student outcomes memo.* Philadelphia, PA: Author. Retrieved from http://www.projectL.I.F.T.charlotte.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/L.I.F.T.-Year-5-student-outcomes-memo-and-executive-summary.pdf

22. Data not available before 2011 or after 2017

23. North Carolina uses the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) to evaluate how much individual students progress from year to year based on results of state assessments. EVAAS results are normed growth calculations, adjusted annually, that indicate whether students met expected growth targets based on two years of student results. EVAAS does not report individual student results, but instead reports results by school.

24. From 2009–10 to 2011–12, Algebra I and English I assessments were administered. In 2012–13 and 2013–14, Math I and English II were administered. End-of-course results for all schools from 2009–10 to 2011–12 include re-tests. Re-tests were not administered beginning in 2012–13.

25. Reading proficiency is a composite of English I and II proficiencies.

26. Math proficiency is a composite of Algebra I and Math I. Including Math I assessments administered at L.I.F.T. middle schools increased proficiency by up to 10 percentage points each year from 2013–14 to 2017–18.

27. Research for Action. (2018). *Project L.I.F.T.: Year five student outcomes memo.* Philadelphia, PA: Author. Retrieved from http://www.projectL.I.F.T.charlotte.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/L.I.F.T.-Year-5-student-outcomes-memo-and-executive-summary.pdf

28. The evaluators conducted separate analyses for schools serving grades K–5, PreK–8 and 6–8 because students at PreK–8 L.I.F.T. schools had higher poverty rates and lower academic achievement than students at K–5 schools. The longitudinal analyses did not find any significant impact on the academic performance of third-graders who started at a PreK–8 L.I.F.T. school compared to non-L.I.F.T. CMS students.

29. Research for Action. (2018). *Project L.I.F.T.: Year five student outcomes memo*.

30. Research for Action. (2018). *Project L.I.F.T.: Year five student outcomes memo*. The analysis did not find a similar effect with English for sixth-graders who started at L.I.F.T.'s middle school, or for either math or English for sixth-graders who started at L.I.F.T. PreK–8 schools.

31. Research for Action. (2018). *Project L.I.F.T.: Year five student outcomes memo.*

32. Research for Action. (2018). *Project L.I.F.T.: Year five student outcomes memo.*

33. Research for Action. (2018). *Project L.I.F.T.: Year five student outcomes memo.*

34. Based on data from Project L.I.F.T.

35. Based on data from Project L.I.F.T.

36. Based on data from Project L.I.F.T.

37. Based on data from Project L.I.F.T.

38. Oakdale Elementary school became a L.I.F.T. school in 2018, bringing the total number of schools in the L.I.F.T. learning community to 10. Oakdale implemented Opportunity Culture in the 2018–19 school year.

39. Backes, B. & Hansen, M. (2018). *Reaching further and learning more? Evaluating Public Impact's Opportunity Culture initiative*. Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research and Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from https://caldercenter.org/sites/default/files/WP%20181_0.pdf

40. Backes, B. & Hansen, M. (2018). *Reaching further and learning more? Evaluating Public Impact's Opportunity Culture initiative*.

41. Opportunity Culture. (n.d.) Opportunity Culture Dashboard 2018–19. Retrieved from https://www.opportunityculture.org/dashboard/

42. Unlike the L.I.F.T. Academy at West Charlotte High School, the other CMS "graduation academies" target over-age and under-credited students as the original L.I.F.T. model did.

43. Charlotte civic and community leaders, including several L.I.F.T. funders, launched Read Charlotte in 2015. For more on Read Charlotte, see https://readcharlotte.org/

44. Charlotte civic and community leaders, including several L.I.F.T. funders, formed the Leading on Opportunity Council in 2017. For more on the council, see https://www.leadingonopportunity.org/about

45. See: Foundation For The Carolinas. (2017). *The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force report*. Retrieved from https://www.fftc.org/sites/default/files/2018-05/LeadingOnOpportunity_Report.pdf

46. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. (2018). *Breaking the link,* p. 9. Retrieved from http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/accountability/Documents/Breaking%20the%20Link%20English.pdf