

Supporting Early Readers in Philadelphia's Independent Charter Schools: An Initial Inquiry into Cross-School Collaboratives



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Acknowledgements

The authors are also grateful for the insights of the independent charter school representatives interviewed for this study.

Miriam Sondheimer and Matt Kelley from the Philadelphia School Partnership, Steve Zimmerman from the Coalition of Public Independent Charter Schools, and Megan Ohlssen from the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools also provided essential context to inform this work.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the intellectual contributions of Ruth Curran Neild, Director of the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium, and Abigail Gray, Senior Researcher at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania, throughout the research and writing process. At Research for Action, Katie Carter provided helpful feedback on drafts.

The William Penn Foundation provided funding for this work as part of its goal of supporting early literacy in Philadelphia. The Foundation did not exercise editorial control over this report, and the contents do not necessarily reflect their views.

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Suggested Citation

Comly, R., Fink, R., Pierce, J., & Flack A. (2018). *Supporting early readers in Philadelphia's independent charter schools: An initial inquiry into cross-school collaboratives*. Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Education Research Consortium.

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An Initial Inquiry into Cross-School Collaboratives

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Why this study

The City of Philadelphia has identified improving early literacy as a key civic priority. The goal is to support children's literacy development in school, at home, and in the community—regardless of where students live or attend school in Philadelphia. For this reason, civic efforts have sought to engage families, communities, and the city's public and private schools. From the public education sector, representatives from both traditional public schools and charter schools provide leadership for Read by 4th, the citywide campaign to promote grade-level reading by fourth grade.

Charter schools enroll about one third of all public school students in Philadelphia, and more than half of Philadelphia's charter schools are independent. In this report, the term *independent charter schools* refers to stand-alone schools managed by individual operators that are not part of a charter network (also known as a charter management organization). Examples of charter networks are The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), Mastery Schools, and the Universal Family of Schools.

Independent charter schools have unique opportunities and challenges with regard to early literacy instruction. Like all charter schools, independent charter schools have inherent flexibility to innovate to meet student needs, and they can be more insulated from the effects of changes in policy than traditional public schools. At the same time, because they are not part of a larger network featuring a greater pool of teachers and staff with whom to collaborate, or a system to facilitate that collaboration, they are at greater risk of professional isolation. Our prior research suggests that educators at these schools may have fewer opportunities to learn with others about how to improve their craft, including research-based strategies for teaching reading and writing.¹ A key challenge, then, is to maximize the benefits of being an independent charter school and minimize the drawbacks.

All charter schools may benefit from cross-school knowledge-sharing and collaboration, and independent charter schools could gain the most. In Spring 2018 interviews with literacy leaders from Philadelphia charter schools, reported in *Supporting Early Readers: A Scan of K-3 Literacy Practices in Philadelphia Charter Schools*,² we found that the literacy strengths identified by some respondents were considered areas of weakness by others. For example, some schools reported that providing opportunities for tailored support through guided reading³ was a particular strength of their schools, while other schools said that they were struggling to

¹ Comly, R., Fink, R., Mielke, M., & Flack, A. (2018). *Supporting early readers: A scan of K-3 literacy practices in Philadelphia charter schools*. Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Education Research Consortium and Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

² Ibid.

³ Guided reading is a type of small-group instruction focused on reading strategies and skills. Tompkins, G., Campbell, R., Green, D., & Smith, C. (2010). *Literacy for the 21st century: A balanced approach*. Boston, MA: Pearson.



successfully implement guided reading. However, the charter schools were typically unaware of one another's challenges and successes. This finding suggested that Philadelphia charter schools may benefit from knowledge-sharing and collaboration around early literacy development.

Knowledge-sharing among practitioners may be particularly useful in a complex domain like literacy instruction, which must address a range of overlapping goals and instructional areas and meet the diverse needs of students. Early literacy is informed by an ever-evolving research base and characterized by a constant proliferation of new curricula, technologies, and approaches. For educators—especially those in a low-resource environment like Philadelphia's—sifting through all this information in search of effective, manageable approaches presents an ongoing challenge.

Box 1

Independent charter schools in Philadelphia compared to in other cities

- More than half (about 54%) of all charter schools in Philadelphia are independent charter schools.
- New York City has a comparable percentage of independent charter schools – about half of the city's charter schools are independent.
- In Chicago, about 20% of charter schools are independent.⁴

What the study examined

This study is an initial inquiry into the need and opportunity for cross-school professional learning for educators at Philadelphia charter schools. In particular, we focus on independent charter schools that are not part of a charter management network. In our Spring 2018 research, representatives from nine independent charter schools reported that they could benefit from additional professional learning opportunities for implementing best practices in early literacy instruction. For the current study, we invited the principal at each of these nine schools to recommend an early literacy leader to describe how they use information and external professional learning resources to improve their early literacy programs. We also asked about factors that constrain their access to these professional learning resources, additional professional learning that would support early literacy instruction, and the conditions under which those resources would be most useful. Throughout this report, we use “collaboratives” as a term of convenience to refer to cross-school professional learning opportunities generally.

For the current study, we interviewed leaders in early literacy instruction from six independent charter schools in Philadelphia. Four representatives were teacher leaders (e.g., reading specialists). Two representatives were school leaders (e.g., Chief Academic Officers).

⁴ “Charter Schools Office.” *The School District of Philadelphia*. www.philasd.org/charterschools/directory/. Domanico, R. (2015). *School Indicators for New York City Charter Schools 2013-2014 School Year*. New York City Independent Budget Office. “Charter Schools.” *Chicago Public Schools*. https://cps.edu/Schools/Elementary_schools/Pages/Charter.aspx



Readers should bear in mind the limited size of our sample of Philadelphia independent charter school representatives when considering the findings we share in this report.

We also sought examples of collaboratives among charter schools in Philadelphia and in other cities and states. We conducted online research and interviews with stakeholders representing a range of perspectives. Our online research focused on identifying examples of collaboratives involving charter schools for the purpose of improving their education programs. We spoke with ten individuals, including researchers and staff at universities and at policy, advocacy, and philanthropic organizations.

The research questions are:

1. What types of external resources (e.g., formal and informal collaboratives, consultants, professional associations, university programs, other schools) do Philadelphia's independent charter school leaders and teacher leaders use to address instructional challenges and/or to learn about new approaches in K-3 literacy? What factors facilitate or constrain independent charter schools' access to these resources?
2. What types of structures or supports do independent charter school leaders and teacher leaders in Philadelphia believe would be helpful to support their schools' early literacy programs, and what conditions would be necessary for them to use these structures or supports?
3. What supports and collaboratives that involve independent charter schools exist in Philadelphia and in other cities and states?

What the study found

Overall, charter representatives appear to be interested in expanding their literacy expertise through cross-school collaboration. Existing opportunities could be offered more strategically and with more structure, presenting Philadelphia with further opportunity to move the field forward.

Our small sample of representatives from independent charter schools in Philadelphia reported that their schools' early literacy programs, and they themselves as leaders of these programs, could benefit from collaboration and knowledge-sharing with other Philadelphia schools. Our research outlines the factors that respondents believed would facilitate productive knowledge-sharing and highlights two existing examples of collaborations involving independent charter schools.

Current resources for professional learning include informal information-sharing with teachers in other schools, professional development and conferences, and online research.

Respondents from independent charter schools reported finding some, mostly informal, external resources on their own in order to provide as much support as possible to their early literacy programs. Respondents reported forming informal networks with other teachers and with past and present professors, attending professional development and conferences, and researching resources online. One teacher leader explained, "If I see that there's some sort of benefit, even small,



I try to invest the time in it because that's my job. My job is to see that I do the best things for my students."

Informal networks

Respondents reported that they used informal networking to share knowledge and support early literacy instruction. Teacher leaders spoke about:

- *Sharing practices with friends who are teachers:* "Through the years, I've made many friends. I've made many relationships with teachers in this district where I live and everything. And you network among people and ask, 'well what did you do for this, or what did you do for this?' And you all get together."
- *Bringing in strategies and practices used in other schools in which they have worked:* "Some of the teachers we've hired have experience from other charters or from other districts that have shared experiences, and we incorporate [new strategies] that way."
- *Keeping in touch with former colleagues:* Respondents spoke about keeping in touch with teachers or mentors with whom they used to work.
- *Maintaining relationships with professors:* "I'm in school again, so I have the support of my professors. And I still keep in touch with other professors that I've had in the past for seeking help when I don't know or I can't find an answer to helping one of our kids."

One teacher leader explained the motivation for this self-initiated informal networking: "We all want our students to be the best that they can be, and I think that we talk to each other so that we can pick each other's brains to find out what those best ways are."

Professional development and conferences

One teacher leader reported "constantly looking for professional development workshops or conferences about early literacy." As an example, this respondent described a valuable professional development she attended about writing. Another teacher leader reported finding value in external professional developments that came to her school—for example, training teachers on guided reading and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA).⁵

A school leader explained that her school received intensive training from Teachers College when they adopted the Reading and Writing Project's workshop model; however, that training waned as they developed in-house expertise around these workshops. The respondent explained that the school continues to send some teachers to Teachers College to get new ideas from conferences and trainings. For example, she explained, "Right now one of my teachers is piloting—[The Reading and Writing Project] just created a new phonics curriculum—so she is going to go up to a Phonics Institute that they're doing...Two of my teachers went to a one-day [training] that was on writing goals, and then turned around and trained some of the other teachers."

Supports through the Philadelphia School Partnership

In addition to receiving support from informal networks, two respondents reported receiving more formal support for their early literacy instruction from the Philadelphia School Partnership (PSP). One of PSP's main areas of investment, in order to support its mission to improve outcomes for low-income students, is educator development. One respondent, a recruitment coordinator, reported, "I

⁵ The DRA is a test that some schools administer to students individually to determine their reading levels. Beaver, J. (1968). *Developmental reading assessment*. Celebration Press.



attend conferences through [PSP], and I just joined their literacy Community of Practice.” Another respondent, a reading specialist, reported that PSP “helps because you can network with other teachers and other interventionists to find out what’s working in their schools.” This respondent reported that PSP is sometimes more focused on high school; however, “a lot of the connections that I can make through PSP can lead me to primary [school] support as well.” We discuss PSP’s Communities of Practice as an example of knowledge-sharing in Box 2.

Online research

Several teacher leaders reported using online resources and research to support their schools’ early literacy programs. One respondent explained that “if I [feel] like I don’t have a solution based upon my experience or resources that I had found throughout my career, I tend to research other practices.” This respondent described subscribing to email listservs from sources like the American Reading Company, which include articles and research that provide her with new ideas for early literacy instruction. The respondent added that some teachers “really do take initiative to follow blogs and to follow certain social media pages that provide ideas.” Another respondent reported that following a well-respected teacher on social media helped inform the selection of the curriculum used in the respondent’s school.

More than half of respondents reported that their schools relied more heavily on internal expertise than on resources external to the school for early literacy professional learning.

The internal support came in varied forms, including through in-house literacy specialists, internal expertise built from external supports, and schools’ boards.

- *In-house specialists:* Three respondents were reading specialists with a background in early literacy. These respondents reported that their schools leaned heavily on them and their resources to provide support. One explained that her school’s support for early literacy instruction is “me. That’s it. I don’t really feel like we have too much support.” Another respondent reported being one of two reading specialists at her school, and that these specialists are the two “point people in the building that the teachers reach out to when they’re struggling.”
- *Internal expertise built from external supports:* One respondent explained that the school developed in-house expertise in the Reading and Writing Project’s workshop model after receiving “a lot of support directly from Teachers College before, with training and professional developments.”
- *Schools’ boards:* One school leader who reported that teachers at her school largely go to her for early literacy instruction support reported that the school also uses the board as a support when encountering early literacy challenges.



Overall, respondents were open to working with teachers and teacher leaders from other charter schools to support early literacy instruction.

Respondents were eager for opportunities for teachers and teacher leaders to collaborate around early literacy instruction.

Respondents suggested that a collaborative should meet the needs of teachers and teacher leaders, providing space for them to share and hear new instructional strategies and, as one respondent put it, “grow in their craft.” One school leader explained that collaborating “on a teacher level would be great. For teachers from different schools to be able to come together and share and get support and resources and strategies and tools could be great.”

Our small sample of respondents spoke about the instructional benefits that could result from collaboration with other schools. They welcomed the idea of sharing ideas and providing feedback to each other about curricula and instructional practices. One teacher leader said, “I’m all for it. I mean, I’m sitting on an island, by myself.” Another teacher leader explained that collaboration with teachers outside of her own independent charter school “gives teachers different connections and ideas from someone who is not in their personal circle or somebody in their building. That’s a good thing.”

Respondents were frequently unaware of existing opportunities for knowledge-sharing.

Some respondents reported that they depend on the school administration to inform them of collaboratives. Several respondents were unaware of any structured opportunities to collaborate with teachers from charter and/or traditional public schools around instructional issues. Respondents reported that there might be collaboratives that exist that they do not know about, perhaps because word has not gotten to them from their school’s administration or because they have not had the time and resources to find these opportunities on their own.

Respondents were eager to join a learning collaborative with other charter school teachers and teacher leaders, as long as the collaborative met several criteria.

Respondents asked that collaborative activities be sensitive to the time pressures and funding constraints of teachers and school leaders.

Respondents reported that they would be unable to participate in a collaborative that was too expensive or occupied too much of their already-constrained time. They explained that they have considered the cost-benefit of external supports when deciding whether to participate. A school leader stated, “If you don’t see how the school will completely benefit from it, in a short-term way, it can be hard to make the time [for external support and collaboration] when everyone is busy.” One teacher leader said that willingness to collaborate with other charter schools would depend on “the workload and the requirements” involved.



Box 2

Examples of collaboration to support knowledge-sharing among charter school teachers and teacher leaders

We found examples of collaborations that could facilitate knowledge-sharing among educators in independent charter schools. These collaborations take different forms, from voluntary groups of teachers coming together to address common instructional challenges to national coalitions uniting charter schools. Given respondents' desires for more connections among teachers and teacher leaders, we highlight two examples of collaborations that could support respondents' desire to connect at these levels.

Voluntary teacher collaborations

Through its Communities of Practice (CoPs), the Philadelphia School Partnership (PSP) supports school staff to convene and collaborate over a series of issues including literacy, math, special education, instructional coaching, talent, and data and assessments. CoPs gather to discuss a problem of practice identified by someone in the group, and a designated facilitator guides group discussions. Each CoP gathers about once every month. CoPs are open to participants from any school (traditional public, charter, private, or parochial), and participants choose to attend meetings based on their own availability or interest in a particular topic. Announcements regarding the CoPs are often included in the school district's Teacher Information Board, which is emailed to all School District of Philadelphia teachers. However, teacher recruitment at charter, private, or parochial schools is largely done through word-of-mouth and posted on the events calendar on TeachPHL.org. PSP helps coordinate space, sometimes purchases food, and provides stipends to group leaders. All CoPs are free for participants to attend.

Charter-to-charter collaborations

Another example of collaboration is specific charter schools sharing knowledge with other charter schools. One school leader described a motivation for this kind of collaboration in Philadelphia: "I think different schools have different strengths, and so being able to call on those strengths and reach out when you have something that's been a challenge and find out places that have been successful with it and be able to see it in action. Ultimately, we're mostly serving the same kids, in the same city, with some of the same dynamics, so there is a lot to learn from each other." This school leader described an informal partnership with another independent charter school in Philadelphia: teachers from the peer school visit her school to learn about early literacy practices in action and, in return, the peer school hosts visits to observe strong math practice.

The Knowledge is Power Program, or KIPP, is one example of a charter network that offers assistance to other schools in the charter sector, including independent charter schools. KIPP shares its English curriculum, KIPP Wheatley, with other charters at no charge. Charter schools outside of the KIPP network, including some in Philadelphia, implement this curriculum. In addition to offering the curriculum, KIPP has also begun to offer additional support to charter schools in Memphis, Tennessee, around curriculum implementation.⁶

⁶ Bauman, C. (2017). *KIPP launches collaborative with Memphis charters to improve literacy results*.



Respondents wanted a collaborative to share their goals and understand their challenges.

Respondents reported that a collaborative must be relevant to participating schools' needs. One respondent stated, "If it's not meeting the needs of our school, then I'm not going to participate." Respondents also said that a collaborative should bring together educators with shared needs and goals and "similar visions." In the first phase of this research, we found that, on the whole, Philadelphia charter schools share a vision of implementing best practices in early literacy instruction.

Examples of other topics that representatives also said were of interest for collaboration were math instruction, union formation, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Respondents wanted a collaborative with a solid organizing structure and guidelines for collaboration.

As collaboration can be difficult, two teacher leaders indicated that it is important to have "some set rules" or "structured guided questions for our meetings." Several respondents spoke about the importance of collaborators' open-mindedness to sharing practices and learning new strategies.

Some respondents believed their schools' in-house literacy expertise was sufficient.

The respondents from participating independent charter schools relied heavily on internal supports and expertise for early literacy instruction. Some respondents said that their early literacy instruction was already adequate. One teacher leader stated that "people tend to think that what they're doing is best" and that teachers and teacher leaders do not always feel it necessary to learn new practices. This respondent said that some potential participants might not buy in to the need for an instructional collaborative around early literacy. Respondents also reported that, in the past, they declined to participate in external sources of support when they felt that their schools were able to provide internal professional development. One teacher leader said, "I don't think that we have felt the need to have other consultants because we sort of work on professional development as educators ourselves pretty effectively."



Implications for policy and practice

Collaboration among schools may be most feasible at the teacher and teacher leader levels of the school.

Reliance on informal networks, hunger for professional development experiences, and comments about professional isolation from our small sample of respondents suggest that a knowledge-sharing collaborative might fill unmet needs among early literacy leaders in independent charter schools. Although there are some examples of formal collaboratives where whole faculties engage in cross-school collaboration, given the inherent nature of an independent charter school and the cautions provided by respondents, a voluntary collaboration for independent charter school teachers and instructional leaders seems most feasible at this time. A collaborative like this, PSP's Communities of Practice, already exists in Philadelphia. This collaborative might benefit from further support for more systematic participant recruitment and might also consider a community specifically focused on early literacy.

Collaboratives seeking to do this kind of work may need to work creatively to spread the word about their opportunities to individuals at independent charter schools. They may need to connect with a point person at each school to ensure that potential participants have the information they need to access these opportunities. Collaboratives may also want to consider maintaining an active presence on social media and sharing curricular and other materials online, so that teachers and teacher leaders can access instructional supports remotely.

Independent charter schools may also want to institutionalize routine school visits, so that teachers and teacher leaders can learn from the strengths of educators at other schools. Schools that perceive their own in-house literacy expertise to be sufficient could help strengthen other schools' literacy practices while learning about best practices in other content areas. While independent charter schools prize their autonomy, they may welcome opportunities to showcase their instructional strengths and to mitigate the feelings of professional isolation experienced by some of their teachers.

Potential collaborations should have an identified instructional focus and clear goals.

In interviews, respondents reported that a successful collaboration must have clear goals to improve instruction and be organized and accessible in order for charter school staff to participate. The first phase of this research found that Philadelphia charter schools share a vision of implementing best practices in early literacy instruction. This shared vision suggests that a knowledge-sharing collaborative focused on early literacy might successfully address shared goals and find support in Philadelphia. Those who are interested in facilitating this kind of collaborative should ensure that the structure meets the needs of participants, that potential participants know about the opportunity to collaborate, and that the opportunity is time- and cost-effective.



Appendix: Other collaborations involving charter schools

In addition to voluntary teacher collaborations and charter schools helping other charter schools, we identified the following examples of collaborations involving charter schools.

Formal collaborations among charter schools

School districts often provide and support special education services by pooling and sharing resources and knowledge within the district. Independent charter schools often serve small percentages of students identified for special needs services, and these schools have no district-like infrastructure to rely on to help charter educators support these students.

New York City, Washington, DC, and New Orleans are among the cities with large charter sectors that have Special Education Collaboratives. These collaboratives are often made up of charter schools looking to share knowledge and resources about how best to provide necessary services and supports to students with special needs. Collaboratives may vary in shared services provided, size and type of cooperative leadership, school monetary contribution, and number of participating schools.⁷

Collaboration between school districts and charter schools

Respondents from independent charter schools in Philadelphia reported different perspectives about whether they were invited or able to access resources or training provided by the School District of Philadelphia. While one teacher leader reported being unable to access any professional development or resources from the district, another teacher leader disagreed, reporting, “I know we are always invited to the district's conferences. And the state conferences. We're not ostracized from them. We're actually encouraged to attend them.”

Backed by philanthropic support, including from the Gates Foundation, many of the nation's largest cities—including Philadelphia—have attempted district-charter collaborations. The collaborations may focus on a particular issue, such as student enrollment, or schools may come together to address broader issues such as equity and access. School districts often lead these efforts, but charter organizations and others have also taken the lead.

National collaboratives

The Coalition of Public Independent Charter Schools, an organization based out of New York, is working to promote collaboration between the nation's independent charter schools. The organization has hosted a series of interactive webinars and virtual meetings and some convenings and continues to plan and fundraise to sustain its activities. The organization currently lists over 140 members from more than 25 states.

Although none of the Philadelphia independent charter school respondents reported participating in a national charter network, two teacher leaders mentioned participating in national organizations focused on content and curriculum, namely the International Literacy Association and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Design.

⁷ Illinois Network of Charter Schools (2016, June). *The origins of INCS SPED co-op*. Presentation at National Charter Schools Conference.