

THE FIVE DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP CASE STUDY

Solving the complex challenges faced by Gateway Cities almost always involves leaders joining forces across institutions. This is a challenge in itself. Organizations have separate missions, budgets, chains of authority, and systems of accountability. How do they successfully overcome these bureaucratic obstacles? The Five District Partnership's response to the problems caused by student mobility is a powerful case study.

The superintendents leading neighboring school districts in Chelsea, Everett, Malden, Revere, and Winthrop knew that thousands of students were moving mid-year from one of their communities to another. This meant that children were repeating some academic units and missing others, as there were no standard sequences for teaching subjects. They formed the Five District Partnership (5DP) to align teaching plans across schools so that third-grade fractions, for example, are taught everywhere in September. Children who transfer mid-year no longer miss or repeat units. The partnership is not only benefiting students in mobile families; it has become a platform for the districts to work together in a number of innovative ways.

Read on to learn more about the 5DP model and what this case study tells us about leading the way to change in Gateway Cities.

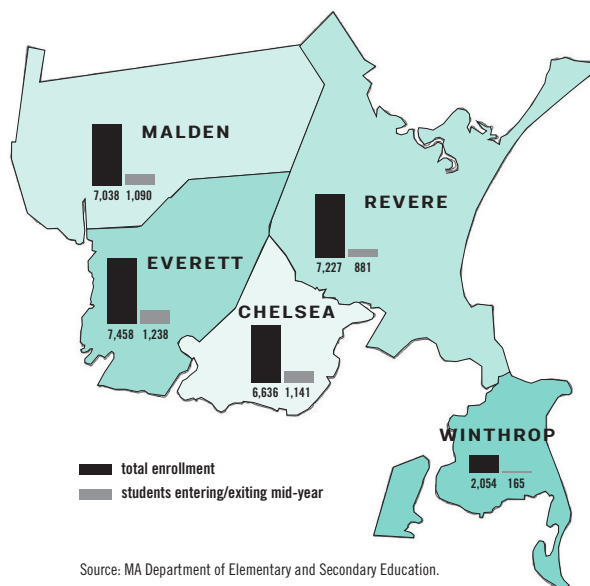
THE PROBLEM: Thousands of transferring students are missing portions of the curriculum

Mary Bourque, superintendent of the Chelsea Public Schools, wrote her doctoral dissertation on the issue of students transferring among the five communities. Dr. Bourque found that the negative impact of high student mobility in the region extended beyond the mobile students, affecting the whole school community.¹

The scenario may look like this: a family cannot keep up with rent for their apartment in Revere, so they move in with relatives in Everett. They save money and eventually rent another apartment in Chelsea. Their daughter learns fractions in the fall in Revere and repeats fractions in the spring in Everett. Unfortunately, she misses the unit on measurement altogether, so she will need remedial help to catch up in Chelsea. She begins the next school year in Chelsea prepared, but teachers must repeat material for her entire class that other transferring students have missed. The pace of instruction slows and academic achievement suffers for everyone.

Dr. Bouque's analysis indicated that if teachers in these five districts could synchronize their teaching, nearly 30,000 students would benefit.

Enrollment and mobility in 5DP Districts, 2014



Source: MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

"Teachers quickly realized that they had a lot in common and interesting insights to share."

THE LEADERS:

Deep roots in the community and strong bonds

The story of the 5DP can't be told without first explaining that all of the leaders involved had deep roots in their communities. Dr. Bouque is a product of the Chelsea Public Schools. She has been an educator in the district for nearly two decades. Over the years, she has formed strong bonds with leaders from the other five school districts, who have similar ties to their communities.

Tom Stella, the assistant superintendent overseeing Everett's participation in the 5DP, graduated from the Everett Public Schools, just like his grandmother and his children. John Macero, Winthrop's superintendent, was a teacher in Everett alongside Dr. Stella for 20 years. Mr. Macero then became a principal in Revere at the same time as Dr. Dakin, Revere's longtime superintendent. Dr. DeRuosi, Malden's superintendent, was also a principal in Revere working under Dr. Dakin. Dr. DeRuosi talks about how growing up in the community gives these leaders deeper understanding. "The mom who comes into our office who works three jobs: I know her...that was my mom," he says.

A few years ago, this group of education leaders started joking about forming a partnership. When the talk turned serious, they realized that launching the Five District Partnership was quite doable. Unlike the students who were moving regularly, this leadership team was stable. As Dr. Dakin says, "The human connections made the effort go easier than if we were strangers."

THE OPPORTUNITY:

The Common Core

Dr. Bourque inspired the key leaders to come together and mobilized buy-in from the key leaders to come together to address it. The timing was fortuitous: The districts had to respond to dramatic change ushered in by the new Common Core Standards. School leaders and teachers would need to translate these standards into curriculum and assessments. It made sense for teachers to collaborate across districts. "None of us had the administrative or teacher capacity to align lessons to the new standards on our own," Dr. Bourque notes. While they were working on the Common Core changes, they could sequence their year-long teaching plans.

THE STRATEGY:

Build a strong and sustainable platform

The superintendents thoughtfully designed a structure for implementing their idea. Here are some key features that made it work:

- **House the partnership in the districts.** The partnership would be a creature of the participating districts, not primarily a project of an external partner, consultant, or state agency. Each district provided resources to the partnership to demonstrate their commitment to it.
- **Hire staff to coordinate the effort:** The districts hired and managed a staff person dedicated to the project, which gave it real focus and capacity.
- **Have teachers in the districts take the lead.** At the end of the day, aligning course sequences would require buy-in from teachers in the classrooms. It made sense that teachers be empowered to develop year-long plans (the document with the unit sequences for teachers to follow) using their knowledge of course progression. Consultants and state curriculum specialists provided some assistance, but teachers drove the decision-making. The partners secured funding to pay the teachers for the work. Teachers gained leadership experience, deepened their expertise, and got to know their colleagues better. This learning stayed in-house.
- **Develop and improve year-long plans through an expanding and iterative process.** The leaders of the 5DP did not press for change overnight. Rather, they put in place a process that initially allowed teachers to develop a small set of year-long plans. Teachers then tested these plans and provided feedback to improve upon them. This iterative process is unfolding over several years, building buy-in and expanding incrementally until all of the common courses are sequenced.
- **Secure outside funding to support the work.** The superintendents were concerned that with tight budgets and other urgent needs, it might be hard to get sufficient funding from all of the districts to support the program. Resources from the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education provided the fuel to get the partnership operating. A grant from the Boston Foundation helped accelerate momentum.



THE IMPLEMENTATION: Learning to walk, trying not to run

In 2012, Cove Johnstone Davis was hired to direct the Five District Partnership. She quickly formed several teams for implementation: the leadership team, including superintendents and assistant superintendents; a steering committee, with three teachers or school level administrators from each district; and content teams, staffed by teachers and curriculum directors.

The initial task was to develop common year-long plans so that teachers would follow the same sequence as they taught their courses. They might use different curriculums, texts, and assessments, but the main components of each subject would be taught around the same time in the academic calendar across all five districts.

The first summer, the 5DP recruited 85 teachers for the content teams. Although there was initially some awkwardness, the teachers quickly realized that they had a lot in common and interesting insights to share. To reinforce this point, Dr. Davis shares an anecdote of two English teachers from different districts discussing the needs of a transferring student. Moments into the exchange, the teachers realize they had both taught the same boy.

In year one, content teams developed sequences for English Language Arts (ELA) and math in grades 2 through 8. That fall, several classes piloted these year-long plans. The teachers collected feedback via surveys and revised the plans accordingly. Over the course of the 2013-14 school year, content teams assembled and created plans for ELA and math for kindergarten and first grade, for history and social studies for grades 2 through 8, and for ELA for grades 9 and 10. Now in the third year, 5DP content teams are working on plans for

math and ELA for the remaining grades, as well as for science, history and social studies. While the bulk of this work has been completed during summer recess, districts have provided teachers with release days when planning meetings were required during the school year.

As the 5DP gained credibility and momentum, many ideas surfaced for how it could be put to good use. The leadership team was careful to remain focused. Dr. Davis was results-oriented and saw it as her responsibility to ensure that the districts remained disciplined about what they took on and what they would sidestep.

Responding to the demands of teaching the Common Core was a founding principle, so it made sense to use the partnership as a platform for sharing professional development capacity to help teachers adapt to this new approach. Much of the training offered jointly through the partnership has involved Understanding by the Design (UbD), a process to help teachers design curriculum, assessments, and lesson plans for Common Core Standards. Teachers using UbD begin by identifying what students are expected to know and how students will demonstrate their ability to put this knowledge to good use. Then they develop a lesson plan that will help them carefully tailor instruction to achieve these outcomes. UbD also calls upon teachers to work collaboratively to regularly review curriculum and assessments, continuously improving to increase student learning.

Through the 5DP, content teams are beginning to use UbD to move beyond year-long plans and also produce lesson plans for courses. These lesson plans will be available to teachers with a login to the 5DP website; unlike the year-long sequences, teachers won't be obligated to use them.

THE RESULTS:

Early returns with long-term payoff potential

The 5DP has already produced significant benefits for the participating districts. Work remains to quantify these gains, but here is what we can say at the moment:

- 1. The 5DP has increased alignment, which means less missed content for mobile students.** Academic achievement is affected by countless factors including the many interventions schools undertake, so it is hard to tease out the effect of the 5DP. But logic holds that when there is standard sequencing across districts, students transferring within the districts will not miss sections of the curriculum as often. Alignment plans are now in place for most classes. Chelsea, Malden, and Revere phase assessments according to the year-long plans, so at least in these three districts, it is possible to confirm that teachers are following common sequencing.
- 2. The combination of 5DP teacher leadership positions, networking, and professional development can elevate instruction.** The 5DP is increasing collaboration by bringing teachers together to deliberate on curriculum, standards, assessment, and lesson plans. The 5DP also gives the districts the ability to make more professional development opportunities available, particularly for educators in small departments with fewer faculty. The superintendents believe bringing talented teachers across districts to work in teams leads to the cross-fertilization of ideas. Describing his first days in the classroom, Dr. Dakin emphasizes the benefits of having teachers interact with master teachers from other districts: "Back then, we closed our classroom doors and taught from the book. Today it's all about taking ideas from great teachers and all of the time trying to get better at our craft."
- 3. The partnership is drawing resources into the district.** In 2014, the partnership was awarded a \$100,000 grant from the Boston Foundation to train teacher leaders to deliver professional development on UbD. More recently, together with a center at UMass Boston focused on math and science instruction, the 5DP received a \$50,000 grant to train middle-school science teachers on new science standards and developing high-quality assessments.

As word about the successful partnership spreads, many groups are approaching the districts with new ideas for collaboration around curriculum, assessment, and professional development. The scale, efficiencies, and successful track record are appealing to funders. Relationships between teachers across the district continue to develop and strengthen, positioning the 5DP to pursue even more challenging work in the future.

THE ROAD AHEAD:

The 5DP as a vehicle for innovation

An axiom in urban education is that high performance cannot be found at scale. If you look across the country for exceptions to that rule, districts in the 5DP may come as close as any. Together these five districts contain 40 schools and not a single one is rated Level 4 or 5 (the two lowest categories in the state's accountability framework). This strong performance predates the 5DP and can be attributed to many factors. Chelsea, for example, benefited from a two-decade partnership with Boston University. That these systems were relatively high-functioning at the outset certainly contributed to the 5DP's success. Now with the 5DP partnership, these communities are even better situated for additional improvement.

To make further gains closing achievement gaps, Massachusetts needs new strategies to help communities use limited funding to support students and families as efficiently as possible. This will require investing catalytic resources in places that are ready to innovate. New forms of assessment and accountability will be particularly important to directing resources toward more effective teaching and learning.

Assessment has been a prominent issue for 5DP leaders. Chelsea, Malden, and Revere have relied heavily on external partners (ANet and Bay State Reading Institute) to help develop assessments that give teachers a better understanding of how individual students are progressing and help teaching teams target areas for improvement in learning and instruction. Everett was utilizing Edwin Teaching and Learning, an assessment system funded through the Race to the Top grant, which is no longer operational. Training teachers to use assessments and the data they produce on an ongoing basis is costly and time consuming. Positioning the 5DP districts to move forward on this work will require a significant upfront funding commitment from an outside investor.

Another important marker on the road forward for the 5DP is an external evaluation. As with many ambitious education undertakings, the superintendents bootstrapped resources to get the project off the ground. This meant adequate resources were not available to quantify outcomes. Conscious of the need to build future efforts on top of hard evidence, 5DP leaders are eager for a rigorous review.

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LEADING THE WAY TO CHANGE IN GATEWAY CITIES: LESSONS FROM THE 5DP

The 5DP case study offers several lessons for Gateway City leaders working to unite with others in the community to tackle hard problems. First, it is an example of how collaborative leadership can succeed. Collaborative leadership has been a hot topic in Gateway City circles since the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston published a seminal research paper showing the one factor that differentiates cities striving for a comeback is the extent to which the community works together with a common vision for renewal.² This idea has gained traction as an intentional strategy in the form of collective impact initiatives, organized efforts whereby community groups mobilize behind a plan of action. Like the 5DP, the most successful of these efforts have focused on a well-defined solvable problem.³

The 5DP also provides powerful evidence that collaborative leadership can be particularly effective in education settings. Around the same time that the Fed published its findings on resurgent cities, researchers began connecting school improvement to collaborative leadership. While studies had long pointed to principals as change agents, rigorous research suggests an even more effective variant of education leadership comes when administrators, principals, and teachers work together to promote change. This happens through governance models that encourage broad participation in decision-making and shared accountability.⁴ To a T, this is the type of structure the 5DP leaders built.

Viewed from a slightly different angle, another translation of this takeaway is we don't always need a John Wayne to ride into town. There is a popular tendency to credit change to transformational leaders, heroes who save a city or turn around a struggling school, but more often, improvement happens collectively and within a system that can support change. Leaders at the top, in this case the superintendents, are still the catalysts for innovation, but their leadership abilities are effective because the right conditions exist within the system.

Conversely, schools that have chronically struggled may be unresponsive to action initiated at the top, even when leaders do everything right. In education, change may be particularly sensitive to the local factors because schools are by nature places where leadership is distributed. The formal control of superintendents and principals is limited, especially when it comes to instructional practice in the classroom.⁵ When teacher leaders engage effectively, change happens, which in

turn increases the credibility of the leaders at the top. In this way, districts gain momentum.

Harvard's Center for Public Leadership has been working to illustrate how a similar positive feedback loop exists within communities through a concept they call *capital absorption*; put simply, money flows into places that are able to work together to put it to good use.⁶ Growing interest in the 5DP from outside may be evidence of this occurring.

A few reflections on classic leadership theory in the Gateway City context from the 5DP:

One might credit some of the 5DP's success to old-fashioned transactional leadership. From this vantage, the storyline would be that superintendents got what they wanted because teacher leaders were compensated for their time developing the plans, and the approach was not radically different than how curriculum decisions might traditionally play out in the departments of their respective schools. Transactional leadership tactics occur all the time in Gateway Cities (e.g., providing food to get resident organizers to community meetings or paying parents to take on parent leadership roles).

But transactional tactics are generally combined with other strategies to be effective. We cannot discount the profound change introduced by the Common Core, which was asking teachers to give up some control and work more collaboratively than had been the practice up to that point in their careers. In this sense, the 5DP process contained some of the classic features of *adaptive leadership*. The Common Core presented a significant challenge to current teaching practice. By giving teachers control through content teams, they experienced this transition not as a moment of loss but rather as an opportunity. As Ron Heifetz and his colleagues write, adaptive leaders are in the business of "assessing, managing, distributing, and providing context for losses that move people through those losses to a new place."⁷

Finally, there is the very important issue of trust. Going back to the beginning of leadership theory, trust has always been emphasized as a critical factor. The local roots of the 5DP superintendents may have played an important role in securing buy-in, but trust was likely also generated by empowering teachers. Studies show that trust in the direct leader is even more important than trust in organizational leaders higher up the chain of command.⁸

So what can we conclude about the 5DP as a replicable model?

The 5DP demonstrates that partnering is an effective strategy to innovate more efficiently. Modest public and philanthropic resources can facilitate this approach when the conditions are right. It is great to have an external threat or opportunity and entities with the capacity to engage productively (it helped tremendously that all five of these districts were high-functioning going into the partnership). Trust is valuable, but educators without strong relationships will work together to solve problems and build allegiance along the way. The leaders of the five districts want to make this point clear. As Dr. Bourque says, prior relationships aren't a prerequisite: "What is necessary is to identify a common need that you can address together." Perhaps now that the five districts have shown the way, other school systems will follow their lead.

Endnotes

- 1 Mary Bourque. "The Impact of Student Mobility on Academic Achievement" *Doctoral Dissertation* (Boston, MA: Boston University, 2008).
- 2 Yolanda Kodrzycki and others. "Reinvigorating Springfield's Economy: Lessons from Resurgent Cities" *Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Public Policy Discussion Paper* 09-6 (2009).
- 3 Michele Jolin and others. "Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives: A Promising Approach to Addressing America's Biggest Challenges" (New York, NY: Bridgespan Group, 2012).
- 4 For an excellent summary, see Philip Hallinger and Ronald Heck. "Leadership for Learning: Does Collaborative Leadership Make a Difference in School Improvement?" *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 38(6) (2010).
- 5 Kenneth Leithwood and others. "Seven Strong claims about Successful School Leadership" *School Leadership and Management* 28(1) (2008).
- 6 David Wood and Katie Grace. "The Capital Absorption Capacity of Places" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2012).
- 7 Ronald Heifetz and others. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009).
- 8 Kurt Dirks and Donald Ferrin. "Trust in Leadership" *Journal of Applied Psychology* 87(4) (2002).

This paper is one in a series of case studies examining innovative Gateway City initiatives. Each profile explores the unique dynamics of change in small to midsize urban communities, where resources are limited and social challenges are complex. These papers capture the basic mechanics of the initiative. Then they attempt to distill universal lessons for leaders by looking at how communities come together to make their change effort a success.
