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Structures & Supports: Building a Throughline Approach to District Partnerships

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BANK STREET
EDUCATION
CENTER

STRUCTURES & SUPPORTS

BUILDING A THROUGHLINE
APPROACH TO DISTRICT
PARTNERSHIP

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is the culmination of rich partnership work between our dedicated Bank Street staff and a handful of public school district leadership teams with the shared goal of moving their school systems forward, with educators, for students. Specifically, three of those leadership teams are deeply profiled here in this paper. We are indebted to these partners for their continued commitment to learning with us and are grateful to them for allowing us to share and compare their different stories. There is no one path toward large-scale instructional improvement, and leading these types of efforts requires immense fortitude. We marvel every day at the perseverance of our district leadership partners as they navigate the complexity of this change work and the resilience of school and teacher leaders who grapple with how to respond to shifting expectations and create meaningful educational experiences for their students.

Our evolving work has been shaped by an intersection of systems thinkers, educational leaders, and organizational change researchers. One particular example of this intersection that we are drawing on more and more is the concept of internal coherence for instructional capacity-building in schools. After working for a decade with Harvard Graduate School of Education's Richard Elmore, Dr. Michelle Forman and her colleagues have published an invaluable book on this topic.¹ We are now partnering closely with Michelle to apply these ideas to learnings and implications that stem from this report.

Lastly, we are thankful for the resources provided to us — technically, theoretically, financially, and organizationally — by a host of supporters to plan, execute and learn from these engagements. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Wallace Foundation, and Carnegie Corporation of New York have all provided funding as well as strategic guidance. And Shael Suransky, President of Bank Street College of Education, his leadership team, and the larger college community have all offered equal amounts of critical friendship and unwavering championing of this ambitious agenda we share with district leaders to build better supports and resources for large scale instructional improvement. It is heartening to be part of a network of people and organizations that care as deeply as we must about achieving high quality learning experiences for the diversity of learners we, as a country, have in our care.

This report was supported by the Bank Street Learning Agenda, with generous funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. It was authored by Jessica Charles, with Doug Knecht and Allison Milby contributing details of the partnership experiences.

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¹ Forman, M., Stosich, L. & Bocala, C. (2017). *The Internal Coherence Framework: Creating Conditions for Continuous Improvement in Schools*. Harvard Education Press.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When teachers, school leaders and central office staff are all pulling in the same direction, districts can more effectively implement initiatives that help students learn. However, it is commonplace in partnerships between school districts and outside organizations, such as educational nonprofits, consulting firms, and institutions of higher education, to work in narrower ways that actually discourage districts from developing the type of coherence that is essential to improving outcomes for kids.

Bank Street College is committed to collaborative, systematic district reform that supports every layer of the school system so that districts are able to thoughtfully plan and implement large scale instructional improvement initiatives to achieve maximum impact on student learning. The Bank Street Education Center “Education Center,” has developed a “Throughline” approach to district reform, designed to support districts across the system to foster conditions that enable schools to act as units of change and embed strong instructional practices through teacher leaders and teaming. The concept was developed out of our team’s significant collective experience working in the New York City Department of Education on system-wide change initiatives, and in response to literature that identifies the need to coordinate instructional leadership across five components: a coherent instructional system, teacher networks, coaching, school instructional leadership, and district instructional leadership. The Throughline approach is Bank Street’s effort to work with districts to coordinate many of these components to benefit students.

Since the Education Center was founded in 2014, we have gathered a substantial amount of information that confirms many of our instincts and much of the literature about what matters in system-wide reform. It has also taught us lessons about some of the challenges that arise in supporting districts to coordinate layers of the system to improve instruction. Additionally, our data will inform our next steps as the Education Center embarks on its third year as an organization. This report aims to tell the story of how the Throughline has developed, by describing how three of the Education Center’s early partnerships on the East Coast and in the Midwest unfolded. While each of the part-

nerships was distinctive, this report also aims to cull some “lessons learned” across the partnerships, drawing on themes that have emerged from reviewing key documents across the three districts, visiting over 50 classrooms, and conducting interviews with teachers, leaders and other school personnel in the districts.

Our reflections on the data and our experiences have surfaced several lessons for engaging in professional learning partnerships with school districts. First, **building a shared and actionable vision of an instructional core is a challenge at the district level.** District actors are often siloed from one another, and decisions about matters such as curriculum adoption and instructional vision tend to be made by central office staff without a commitment from key stakeholders, such as teachers and building principals. Second, **districts need intensive support to create coherent adult learning experiences,** as well as tools and resources, that support school-level change and align with the instructional goals of the district. Districts’ needs range from materials creation and specific skill development for coaches and teachers to holistic professional development planning for the scope of a school year or longer. Third, **broad work with districts in one area doesn’t necessarily translate into deep system-wide engagements, and vice versa.** We believe there may be a relationship between the breadth of the work and the depth of the engagement a district can absorb.

Finally, our work with districts has strengthened our commitment to the Throughline. Given that districts have limited resources, we have honed our approach to **position the school as the unit of change as a crucial element of this work.** While district leaders, coaches, principals, teachers and other school staff must have a stake in the district’s vision, schools must take ownership of an instructional vision and create structures within the school, which are supported by the district, to enact meaningful change in classroom practice.

INTRODUCTION

When teachers, school leaders and central office staff are all pulling in the same direction, districts can more effectively implement initiatives that help students learn. However, it is commonplace in partnerships between school districts and outside organizations, such as educational nonprofits, consulting firms, and institutions of higher education, to work in narrower ways that actually discourage districts from developing the type of coherence that is essential to improving outcomes for kids. Often, these outside organizations contract with districts to provide focused professional development opportunities for teachers on a particular curriculum package or pedagogical approach, or work with central office staff on reorganization or change management around a discrete initiative. Unfortunately, such well-intentioned efforts often fall flat because the district has not created supports throughout the system that are necessary to align the efforts of central leaders and principal supervisors with the culture, structures and instruction of the school communities they aim to help improve. The result is typically increased confusion and frustration, not improved student outcomes.

Bank Street College is committed to collaborative, systematic district reform that supports every layer of the school system so that districts are able to thoughtfully plan and implement large scale instructional improvement initiatives to achieve maximum impact on student learning. The Bank Street Education Center “Education Center,” which is the professional development arm of the College created in 2014, has developed a “Throughline” approach to district reform, designed to support districts across the system to foster conditions that enable schools to act as units of change and embed strong instructional practices through teacher leaders and teaming. The concept was developed out of our team’s significant collective experience working in the New York City Department of Education on system-wide change initiatives, and in response to research by scholars such as Paul Kobb and Kara Jackson that identifies the need to coordinate instructional leadership across five components: a coherent instructional system, teacher networks, coaching, school instructional leadership, and district instructional leadership.² The Throughline approach is Bank Street’s effort to work with districts to coordinate many of these com-

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Cobb, P., & Jackson, K. (2011). Towards an Empirically Grounded Theory of Action for Improving the Quality of Mathematics Teaching at Scale. *Mathematics Teacher Education and Development*, 13(1), 6-33.

ponents to benefit students. Over time, we have incorporated many of these into a Districtwide Instructional Initiatives (DII) Framework, which we have begun to use in our work with all of our district partnerships.

Our team comes to this work with a wealth of collective experience working in leadership roles at the New York City Department of Education over the last decade, during which time the district was able to create significant system and instructional change by coherently leveraging multiple parts of the largest school system in the country. As part of the Bank Street community, we locate ourselves squarely in the progressive tradition and our professional learning work is informed by principles and practices created here at Bank Street. Our professional learning work is informed by the Developmental-Interaction approach articulated and practiced by Bank Street faculty and other leading educational thinkers, researchers and practitioners over the past half century.³ In part, this means we work with districts over time to intentionally surface multiple stakeholder perspectives and co-construct a meaningful strategic plan of action based on their own unique context and assessment of their needs and areas of strength. During implementation of the plan, we give special attention to the development, supports and accountability required to move the different groups of educators in the system forward, leveraging proven leadership practices for both change management and adult learning. Finally, from start to finish we ensure there are feedback loops from the classroom level back “up” through the layers to generate data for needed real-time adjustments. However, despite the depth of experience and research base from which it draws, the Throughline approach itself, as we have currently articulated it, is relatively new. We developed and honed it as we worked in partnership with several urban districts throughout the country over the past two years, during which time we have learned a tremendous amount about the way districts take up strategy and professional learning resources, and the ways in which those resources are used and leveraged (or not) across entire school systems. The purpose of this report is to highlight some of the lessons we have taken from our engagements, and to chart a course for our next phase of work with districts and schools.

³ Nager, N., & Shapiro, E. K. (2000). Revisiting a progressive pedagogy: The developmental-interaction approach. SUNY Press; Shapiro, E., & Biber, B. (1972). The education of young children: A developmental-interaction approach. Teachers College Record.

THROUGHLINE APPROACH

GROUNDING IN EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING

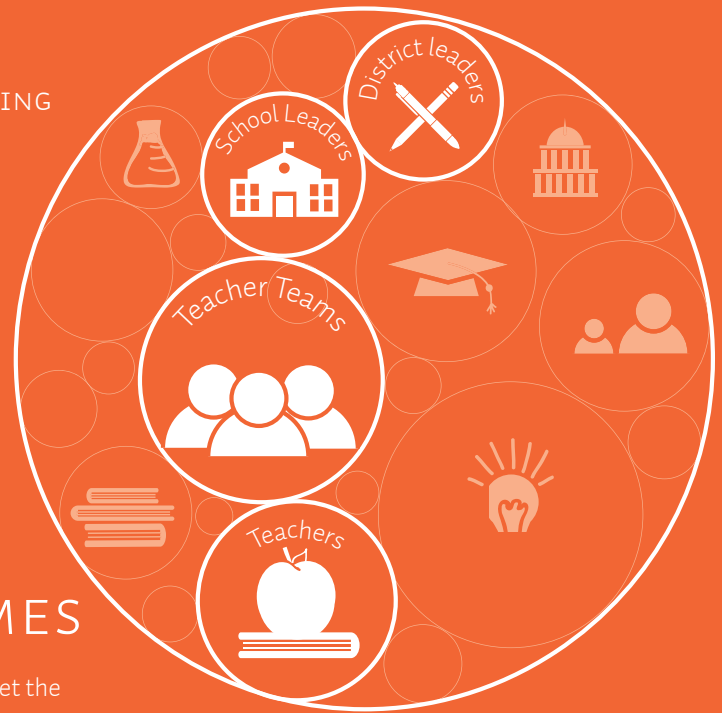
FOCUSED ON ADULT DEVELOPMENT

BUILT AROUND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

SUPPORTED BY DISTRICT CONDITIONS

RESULT: CLASSROOM
AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

Teacher/other staff grow, develop, and shift practice to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of all students



COMPILING THIS REPORT

Since the Education Center was founded in 2014, we have gathered a substantial amount of evidence that, on the one hand, confirms many of our instincts, and the research on district improvement, about what matters in system-wide reform. On the other hand, it has taught us lessons about some of the challenges in supporting districts to coordinate layers of the system for instructional improvement. It has also provided information that will inform our next steps as the Education Center embarks on its third year as an organization. This report aims to tell the story of how the Throughline has developed, by describing how three of the Education Center's early partnerships on

the East Coast and in the Midwest unfolded. While each of the partnerships was distinctive, this report also aims to cull some "lessons learned" across the partnerships, drawing on themes that have emerged from reviewing key documents across the three districts, visiting over 50 classrooms, and conducting interviews and surveys with teachers, leaders and other school personnel in the districts. These data were analyzed, in each case, using a framework tied to each district's instructional priorities, which guided their work with the Education Center. Additionally, key Education Center staff were interviewed to better understand how the work unfolded.



PORT CITY



36,000
STUDENTS



46% AFRICAN AMERICAN
44% HISPANIC
8% WHITE

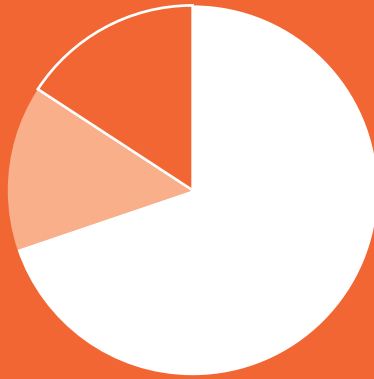
- Worked on Pre-K curriculum and instruction
- Worked mainly with district leadership and teacher coaches
 - Built professional learning community
 - Strengthened coaching practices



LAKESIDE



39,000
STUDENTS



67% AFRICAN AMERICAN
14% HISPANIC
15% WHITE

- Worked with principal supervisors
 - Conducted collaborative classroom observations
 - Strengthened coaching practices
 - Aligned professional learning to the Common Core



COLONIAL TOWN



21,000
STUDENTS



42% AFRICAN AMERICAN
41% HISPANIC
14% WHITE

- Conducted collaborative district-wide review
 - Visited 40 classrooms
- Created professional learning structures
 - Professional learning map
 - Provided ongoing professional learning to 125 teachers

ILLUSTRATING THE EDUCATION CENTER PARTNERSHIPS

Districts are complex and unique organizations, and the Education Center works with its partners in to match their needs and capacities. To represent the reach of the partnership in each of these partner districts, we have distilled the complexities of each to a simple graphic, seen on the right. Circles stand for different groups; the outermost represents district leaders, then school leaders, teacher teams, and classroom teachers. Each partnership's depth and breadth will be illustrated as a shaded area in the circle.



PORT CITY

SELECTING QUALITY CURRICULAR MATERIALS TO STRENGTHEN INSTRUCTION IN PRE-K

Port City School District is located in a medium-sized city on the East Coast, where shipping, rail and manufacturing have long been mainstays of the local economy. The district serves approximately 36,000 students, 46% of whom are identified as Black, 44% of whom are identified as Hispanic and 8% of whom are identified as White. The median household income served by the district is about \$35,000 a year, and nearly 33% of the students live in poverty. In 2011, Port City expanded access to a pre-K program that now serves 1,800 children each year. The program is run out of the Office of Early Childhood (OEC), and is overseen by an Executive Director who reports to the district superintendent. Initially, Port City partnered with the Education Center to help them choose Early Childhood Education curriculum supplements for their pre-K program. However, over the course of two and a half years, the partnership has expanded to include professional learning for teachers and site leaders across the Early Childhood Education program, as well as strategic guidance for the OEC leadership team.

Early on, Port City's district leaders decided to create a professional fellowship as a means to address an essential question they developed with the Education Center staff:

What curriculum resources and accompanying teacher development supports will strengthen instruction across pre-K programs?

As part of an effort to choose supplemental curriculum materials for pre-K, the fellowship convened a group of instructional leaders, including central office staff, an early childhood principal supervisor, school leaders, teacher coaches and veteran pre-K teachers to investigate the essential question. As we began thinking through content for the fellowship sessions, it became clear that the district efforts to support high-quality teaching practice should be informed by feedback structures that helped the central office staff better understand the needs of teachers and site leaders. In consultation with the district, the Education Center designed learning sessions that helped participants take those needs into account as they reviewed and tried out in their classrooms the various curricular resource options for the pre-K program. Reflections from the fellows showed the fellowship was a welcome and successful initiative in the dis-

district. Furthermore, it confirmed our team’s hunch that district leadership and staff had previously held wide-ranging beliefs of what constitutes strong instructional practice and high-quality curriculum, which led to a disjuncture between central office staff, site leaders and teachers in implementing a coherent instructional vision in the district. Fellows told the Education Center in feedback surveys:

This fellowship has given me the opportunity to be an integral part of choosing a curriculum for our youngest learners. Through our sessions my thoughts have been validated. As a result, I feel much more confident in being a leader for our teachers and an advocate for our children. Sharing with a variety of stakeholders within Port City Public Schools has also given me insight on how to lead teachers in providing the best experience for our students. - Port City Teacher Coach

This experience has been great. I feel that I have a say in the direction of where we are going based upon the review of various curricula for early childhood. I have never looked into any curriculum with this much tenacity and depth. Now I can pretty much support the curriculum chosen for the upcoming school year with my own professional rationale. - Port City Teacher

The norms established at the very beginning of the Fellowship allowed trust to be built and that trust was evident throughout the Fellowship. We were all on the same page when it came to ensuring our preschoolers received the best experience they can for the two years we have them. It also afforded me the opportunity to work with other professionals whom I may never have met or interacted with. The professionalism which the fellowship was conducted within was amazing. - Port City Teacher Coach

Towards the end of the fellowship, the Education Center team delivered a site leader needs assessment, the results of which showed best practices for coaching instructional staff as the highest area of need (44% of site leaders identified this as an area of need). This data helped us target teacher coaches as a pivotal link in the Port City school system. Recent literature on coaching says that instructional coaches can be highly influential levers for improving instructional practice. Scholars have also identified the political role of

“I feel
much more
confident in
being a leader
for our
teachers and
an advocate
for our
children.”



PRE-K CURRICULUM

DISTRICT FOCUS

The Education Center partnered with district leadership in Port City to strengthen curriculum and instruction in the expanding pre-K program. This work established new opportunities for scaling the program effectively.

coaches in translating and interpreting district policy. In Port City, teacher coaches were well positioned to understand the everyday concerns of the early childhood programs and to connect that knowledge to the vision district leadership was creating for early childhood education across the school system. Because of their potential to impact multiple layers of the system, the following school year the Education Center worked with the 25 teacher coaches to build a professional learning community and strengthen their skills and strategies for teacher support. We developed this group to build a common language around high-quality and developmentally appropriate pre-K teaching practice with district leadership, school leaders, and teachers aligned to the chosen curriculum. Guided by the state's Preschool Teaching & Learning Standards, and informed by Bank Street's deep knowledge of child development and adult learning, the Education Center and Port City's early childhood office used planning tools (such as the Professional Learning Map) to align each component of the sessions to coaches' practice. Across these sessions, in collaboration with the central supervisory team, the Education Center built teacher coaches' sense of ownership by providing opportunities for them to develop, observe, and share a set of norms and model coaching skills and techniques with one another. Coach feedback forms following each

session helped the Education Center measure its impact, inform its engagement in subsequent professional learning sessions, and give coaches a voice in the district strategic planning meetings.

At the same time, the Education Center also supported Port City's OEC leadership team through strategic planning meetings that were focused on strengthening the district's pre-K leadership's vision and change management structures by refining the coaching model and establishing pre-K instructional priorities. Port City and the Education Center used our learning from the professional learning sessions, and our ongoing work together, to begin defining a vision of what high-quality, standards-based pre-K instruction looks like at a system-level and how district leadership can support it. These conversations, grounded in evidence, mobilized our knowledge of how to take instructional initiatives to scale and established a previously non-existent thread of communication between district staff and teacher coaches. Ultimately, engaging with Port City through these activities enabled the Education Center to directly support three layers of Port City's system: the early childhood principal supervisors, the teacher coaches, who worked with teaching teams in schools, and the district leadership team who was charged with strategic decision-making.



PORT CITY PARTNERSHIP



YEAR 1

DEPTH & BREADTH

Through a curriculum-focused fellowship, the partnership enacted supports for a narrow initiative across all layers of the system.

----- DISTRICT LEADERS

----- SCHOOL LEADERS

----- TEACHER TEAMS

----- TEACHERS



YEAR 2

DEPTH & BREADTH

The partnership helped to build the district's vision for early childhood education, created supports for district leaders and professional learning opportunities for teacher coaches. The work with Port City expanded across some layers of the system but did not directly connect to teacher practice.

----- DISTRICT LEADERS

----- SCHOOL LEADERS

----- TEACHER TEAMS

----- TEACHERS

BUILDING THE INSTRUCTIONAL CAPACITY OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS

LAKESIDE

Lakeside is an urban school district in the Midwest. The district serves nearly 39,000 students, 67% of whom are identified as Black/Non-Hispanic, 14% of whom are identified as Hispanic, and 15% of whom are identified as White. Twenty-three percent of the students in the district receive special education services and nearly all students in the district receive free or reduced priced lunch. The district's reported graduation rate in 2014 was 66.1%, up almost 14 points from 2010.

Supported by the Wallace Foundation, the Education Center's work with Lakeside began and has continued as a professional learning initiative with a group of principal supervisors and their lead instructional coaches with the goal of deepening the content knowledge and instructional capacity of these principal supervisory teams to support Common Core aligned instruction. This work was done in service of the district's goal to reimagine the role of principal supervisors as powerful instructional leaders and alongside Lakeside's other efforts to support this shift. To anchor our work, we collaborated with the Chief Academic Officer's team to create the essential question:

How can we build the capacity of our network teams to support standards-aligned instruction across schools?

Together we created a professional learning series that would enable the principal supervisory teams (who oversee 12-15 principals each) to recognize and support Common Core-aligned instruction by applying related tools and leadership and coaching moves.

Principal coaches participated in school and classroom visits, led by the Education Center, to ground their collective learning in their district's teacher and student work. As the principal supervisors and coaches developed a shared understanding of strong class-room practice in relation to the Common Core, they shared these practices with building principals, in an effort to meet a district goal of increasing student engagement in rigorous instruction across the district.

The participants in our professional learning approach deemed it to be effective and an important use of time. Principal supervisors and coaches with whom the Education Center worked in Lakeside reported that participation in the professional learning sessions has clarified their work, their ability to use evidence, and their capacity to support principals in their work to implement and align instruction to the Common Core Standards. In a statement that reflected the general spirit of the feedback we received, one principal supervisory team member noted, “I think these sessions are making our team much more instructionally focused.” Another told us, “The sessions have caused me to reflect on the types of support that we provide our principals and how I can more effectively support the principals in assisting teachers in unpacking standards.” Finally, principal coaches reflected on how the professional learning series had sharpened their lens around high-quality instruction, citing the sessions as causing them to look, “with deeper ‘eyes’ in the classroom” and empowering them to bring that focus to their work with schools: “I feel more empowered to use the language around the Common Core and believe I can support principals more effectively.”

Notably, after two engagements with the Education Center on the professional learning of principal supervisory teams, with a deep focus on math in the second year, district leaders expressed concerns that the vision for student engagement and high-quality instruction that is now held in common by this group has not taken root among building leaders and teachers throughout the district. While we spent most of our energy building a shared vision for instructional quality with the principal supervisory teams, challenges remained in aligning key organizational supports such as adult learning experiences for principals and teachers that could help build a district-wide shared vision of strong classroom practice. This means that teachers and students are working together in ways that do not yet reflect the ambitious vision of instruction required by the standards and articulated by Lakeside’s Chief Academic Officer.

We attribute this continued gap between district vision and classroom practice, in part, to the uneven attention to vari-

“The sessions have caused me to reflect on the types of support that we provide our principals and how I can more effectively support the principals in assisting teachers in unpacking standards.”

SUPERINTENDENT

CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS

PRINCIPAL COACHES



STRUCTURES & SYSTEMS

ORG SUMMARY

Lakeside schools are led by the Superintendent and Chief Academic Officer. The Education Center partnered with the district's principal supervisory teams to support Common Core aligned instruction.

ous layers within Lakeside as principal supervisory teams engaged in this professional learning. One district leader articulated this, when asked what would move their instructional work in the district: “Consistency — something in the district that every school needs to be doing.” Achieving such consistency, especially within the district’s context of increasing school-level autonomy, is not an easy task.

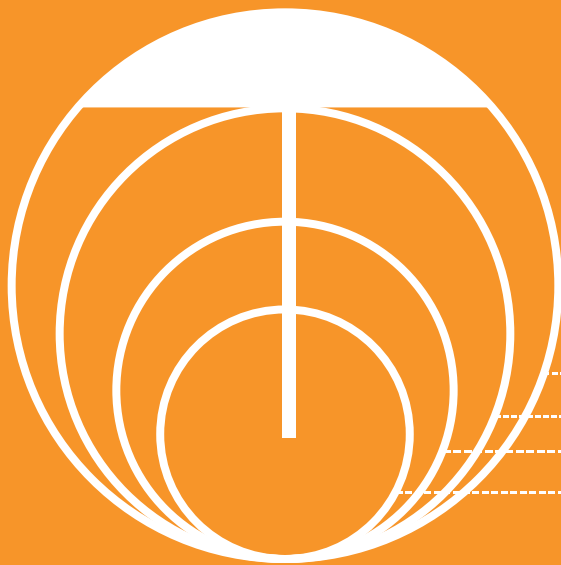
In the second year of our partnership, we attempted to address this issue, which allowed for some in-roads with the Throughline approach. We introduced principal supervisors and coaches to the Internal Coherence Framework that drives much of the Education Center’s work at the school-level, carved out time for the principal supervisory teams to plan professional learning for school leaders during sessions, and provided a learning series based on *The Art of Coaching* by Elena Aguilar; additionally, Lakeside invited us to be a part of its annual summer school leadership institute, in which we shared some of the tools and activities used with the principal supervisory teams. Despite these efforts, in retrospect we can see how the design of the engagement did not build a clear set of ‘shared work’ with schools across the layers of the system to support strengthening instruction at the classroom level. We think this added to the level of challenge presented to principal

supervisory teams in their efforts to impact instructional practices at scale across classrooms.

We recognize that this is a core challenge of our district implementation work. The point of entry in this case generated important learning for the participants — and clarified the broader need. However, the absence of a consistent thread through the layers of the system to classrooms in our partnership meant that the broader need was more loosely addressed by our support efforts. In approaching partnerships moving forward, we have decided to strategically focus on **the school as the unit of change** in order to firmly ground professional learning experiences for leaders and executive teams in the everyday experiences of teachers and students. Given the finite resources of school districts, we believe it may be more productive to lead with this approach so that the type of change in classroom practices that school districts like Lakeside hope to see can be more fully realized.



LAKE SIDE PARTNERSHIP



YEAR 1

DEPTH & BREADTH

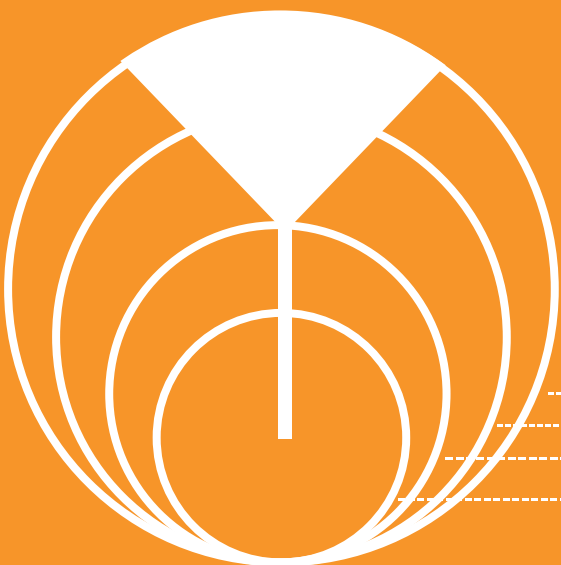
The partnership led to a broad initiative to support principal supervisors, which included school visits connected to Common Core quality practices.

----- DISTRICT LEADERS

----- SCHOOL LEADERS

----- TEACHER TEAMS

----- TEACHERS



YEAR 2

DEPTH & BREADTH

Broadened the work with district leaders and some building principals around math instruction and school change strategies, which included visits to school connected to the Common Core and school change strategies.

----- DISTRICT LEADERS

----- SCHOOL LEADERS

----- TEACHER TEAMS

----- TEACHERS

COLONIAL TOWN

IMPLEMENTING A COLLABORATIVE DISTRICT REVIEW

Colonial Town School District is located in a medium-sized city in New England. The district serves over 21,000 students, of whom 42% are identified as African American, 41% of whom are identified as Hispanic, 14% of whom are identified as White, and 2% of whom are identified as Asian American. In 2013, the district reported a 71.4% high school graduation rate, up significantly from 2009, in which only 58.1% of students graduated. The district attributes much of this success to a school change initiative that has focused on student engagement and teacher performance, including a teacher evaluation system that rewards teachers for high performance and provides support to teachers performing poorly in the classroom. In 1997 the district implemented a rich tapestry of early childhood education programs that serve approximately 1700 children each year; however, in recent years the district leadership wanted to revisit the question of consistency and quality across all their programs.

The early childhood education landscape in Colonial Town, and pre-K in particular, is complex. Pre-K in Colonial Town is delivered across multiple strands, including Head Start, traditional public schools, and magnet schools (which are public, but have specialized themes and visions for curriculum and instruction). Coincidentally, the Education Center's partnership with the district began just after the director of Early Childhood Education retired, and as the district was attempting to address inequities in early childhood education access and resourcing. The district was also ramping up to staff and launch a new early childhood education center to accommodate one-quarter of all 3-4 year olds in the system, staffed only with certified early childhood teachers, in order to create a model program for implementing a new curriculum and developmentally appropriate practices.

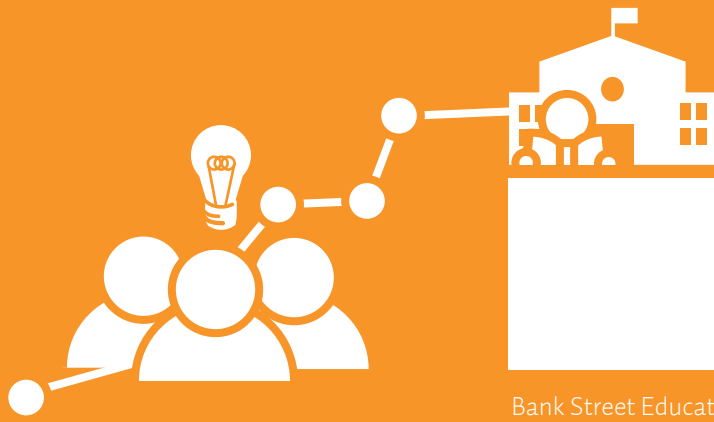
The Education Center partnered with Colonial Town to develop an inquiry process to learn more about the early childhood practices in the district. Leaders in Colonial Town were aware, given the variety of delivery models for pre-K, that they needed more information about what early childhood education practices looked like throughout the district. Together, the Education Center and district leaders designed a diagnostic review of their early childhood education programs, driven by the essential question:

How do current resources, practices, and supports align to developmentally meaningful, play-based, trauma-informed approaches to learning?

As part of that review, Bank Street staff were paired with district personnel to visit half the early childhood education classrooms in Colonial Town. We took low-inference notes on the activities in which children and teachers were engaged; interviewed central office staff, site leaders, teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, and community members; and facilitated multiple reflective activities, such as group debriefs, post-visit reflection surveys, and group norming sessions. These activities, which took place over two days on the ground, were designed to collect a broad swath of information about early childhood practice in the district, and to enable the district leaders to make sense of the data they were collecting so they could plan the next phase of professional learning. The Education Center assisted them by sorting these data into themes, and connecting them back to the essential question that guided their work together.

One clear theme that emerged from the collaborative district-wide review was the wide variability of early childhood practices across the district. One school leader stated in an interview, “We use [Adopted Curriculum] as a resource, but we create our own curriculum. Some teachers are working on project-based learning. They use resources from everywhere, including [Adopted Curriculum].” This illustrated that while the district had adopted a curriculum for the pre-K program to use across the district, teachers and site leaders took that up in various ways, depending on their own vision for what quality instruction meant to them. Another example of uneven quality was raised by a community partner, who indicated, “A framework to think about the whole child and family is missing...knowing how to interact with families and communities effectively.” This enabled Colonial Town to see that while some pre-K classes or sites may be connecting to families and communities well, and grounding their approach in child development, practice varied across the district, and there wasn’t a shared understanding of how to intentionally leverage play and interact with families in ways that support all children.

“The work
with Colonial
Town is a
testament to
the Through-
line’s potential
for district
reform.”



EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER

KEY IMPACT

Bank Street Education Center worked with Colonial Town schools to establish a new early childhood learning center, where the district's educators receive professional development in alignment with the program vision.

Out of this collaborative inquiry into pre-K practices grew a partnership between the Education Center and Colonial Town that led to continued professional learning opportunities for early childhood educators, and continued collaboration with district leadership to reflect upon and modify the district's approach to early childhood education. In response to the variability in early childhood practice detected, the Education Center made three recommendations that addressed the need for more engagement across the layers of the system to create shared understandings and practices: 1) deepening collaboration with stakeholders to develop a clearly articulated vision for early childhood practice across the district; 2) creating a plan for implementing a district-wide vision through pre-K curriculum and assessments, aligned to professional learning expectations and structures; and 3) strengthening relationships with families and existing community partners to embed best early childhood education practices and build capacity district-wide.

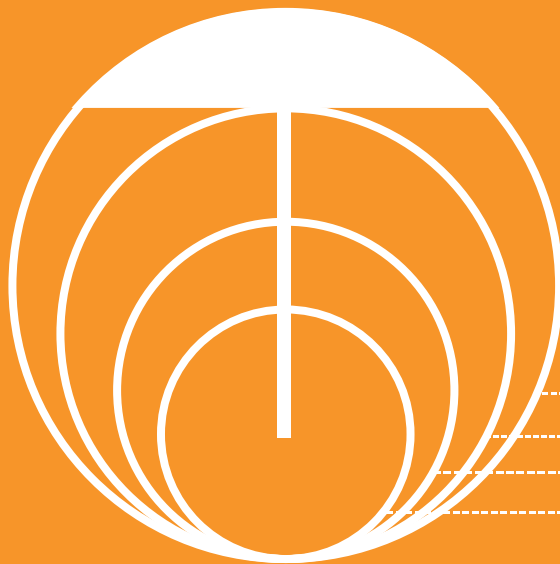
As a result, the Education Center helped the district form a vision committee, comprised of a diversity of constituents whose job it is to develop the district's belief statement for early childhood education across all program strands and develop a communications strategy for engaging families and community partners. Additionally, the Education Center is currently

co-constructing a comprehensive professional learning map with the district to align educator supports to the vision, and bring coherence to curriculum and professional learning supports across the delivery models. At the district's new early childhood education center, the Education Center provides monthly professional learning to over 125 early childhood teachers from programs across the district, including some Kindergarten teachers to begin building common understandings vertically in the system. The Education Center has also offered professional development sessions for instructional managers using the text *Coaching with Powerful Interactions* by Dombro, Jablon and Johnsen.

The work with Colonial Town is a testament to the Throughline's potential for district reform. By engaging stakeholders across the patchwork of early childhood programs and district leadership in the diagnostic review process, we were able to not only engage multiple layers of the system at once, but also able to forge a partnership that enabled the Education Center and the district to begin building lasting organizational supports to sustain district-wide change.



COLONIAL TOWN PARTNERSHIP



YEAR 1

DEPTH & BREADTH

The Education Center provided support to district leaders and included stakeholders across the system in a collaborative district-wide review process.

- DISTRICT LEADERS
- SCHOOL LEADERS
- TEACHER TEAMS
- TEACHERS



YEAR 2

DEPTH & BREADTH

The partnership expanded to include professional development for Pre-K and Kindergarten teachers and leaders as well as support for leadership strategy and capacity building.

- DISTRICT LEADERS
- SCHOOL LEADERS
- TEACHER TEAMS
- TEACHERS

LESSONS LEARNED

THINKING THROUGH THE THROUGHLINE

Though Port City, Lakeside and Colonial Town represent different sets of dilemmas both for the districts themselves and for professional learning partners such as the Education Center, leaders and staff in each district were equally dedicated to improving outcomes for children. Despite their determination, it is clear that implementing district-wide reform is a daunting task, even with the most committed and hardworking leadership and staff. The Education Center's Throughline approach is unfamiliar to most and not easily embedded at the outset. Our early partnerships have taught us important lessons about how districts grapple with planning, executing and sustaining system-wide instructional improvement initiatives in light of our Throughline approach to large-scale change. The following are three lessons that we have learned about supporting districts in this work.

First, **building a shared and actionable vision of a strong instructional core is a challenge at the district level.** District actors are often siloed from one another, and decisions about matters such as curriculum adoption and instructional vision tend to be made by central office staff without ongoing and practice-based input of key stakeholders, such as teachers and building principals. Therefore, it is typical for teachers, principals, coaches, central office staff and executive leadership to have widely varying understandings of and perspectives on what constitutes effective instructional practice. However, we know from research and experience that successful instructional initiatives require a shared vision of what “good” looks like, and a shared vision can only be cultivated when all the adults in a district have opportunities to collaborate and reflect together, contributing their experiences and voices through regular meeting structures and other data feedback loops to inform the process and product. In our work, we have tried to enter as genuine inquiry partners with district and school leaders, coaches and teachers, in order to underscore the importance of distributed leadership and foster shared ownership for the district's instructional vision. We are driven by the notion that our efforts should not be conceived of as merely additional capacity for the district to fill a void – a role we can play temporarily if needed as a PD provider or project management support – but as co-constructors of the change initiative with the leadership invested in learning their way through their challenges. In Port City, we initially succeeded in get-

ting stakeholders from all layers of the district to investigate the connection between pre-K teaching and learning and early childhood curricular options, while in Lakeside it was harder to transcend the boundaries of our initial professional development work with principal supervisory teams.

Second, **districts need intensive support to create adult learning experiences**, as well as tools and resources, that support school-level change and align with the instructional goals of the district. One of the key ways we have provided support to districts is by designing professional development maps, activities and resources to facilitate district learning. In Lakeside, for example, we provided principal supervisors and their lead coaches with professional learning opportunities to build and hone a set of coaching principles and practices, and in Colonial Town we are developing a professional development map to align the professional learning experiences for teachers at the early childhood center with the district's instructional vision. Districts' needs range from materials creation to specific skill development for coaches and teachers to holistic central office professional development planning for the scope of a school year or longer. One challenge for the Education Center has been to determine the right balance between creating professional learning content for districts and building capacity throughout the layers of the system to support and sustain it.

Third, **broad work with districts in one area doesn't necessarily translate into deep system-wide engagements, and vice versa**. Each of our early partnerships followed different developmental trajectories, and each partnership grew broader within one or more layer of the system and stayed narrower in others. In Port City, we began by engaging a thin slice of key representatives from all layers of the district in evaluating potential early childhood curricula. We supported them in choosing one that aligned with their instructional vision and classroom experiences. Then, in Year Two of our partnership, we worked more deeply with district leaders and teacher coaches, but did not work as directly with teachers. In Lakeside, we worked directly with district leaders and principal supervisory teams in Year One, and expanded that work in targeted ways with building principals in Year Two. In each of those years we also grounded our professional learning activities in visits to schools and classrooms. In Colonial Town, we began by engaging representatives from across the district in an inquiry into early childhood instruc-

“Districts’ needs range from materials creation to specific skill development for coaches and teachers to holistic professional development planning”

“The degree to which a particular district affords or hinders cross-district learning makes a significant difference in the outcomes of our work together.”

tional practices, and expanded our work from there to develop professional learning for teachers and leaders across the district, aligned to the district’s vision for high-quality early childhood education practices we co-created through a process we facilitated.

We see Colonial Town as our most successful attempt at supporting districts with the Throughline approach, but we only have educated guesses about why this was the case. After carefully considering the way the partnerships unfolded, we hypothesize that the way a partnership begins matters. While the Education Center’s partnerships always evolve, we noticed that our initial interactions and scope of work with a district often informed the breadth of our interactions with them over time. Furthermore, because the Throughline approach relies upon accessing a variety of stakeholders across all layers of the system in order to institute organizational supports for instructional initiatives, the degree to which a particular district affords or limits cross-district learning makes a significant difference in the outcomes of our work together. In particular, the engagement in Colonial Town allowed for a collaborative review of practices and perspectives across the district to become the foundation for building a strong strategy and professional learning partnership. The absence of a collaborative review to launch the partnerships in Port City and Lakeside may have hindered our ability to connect the Throughline as efficiently in those districts.

For instance, in Lakeside, beginning the partnership as a discrete professional learning initiative with the principal supervisor group determined the way the district made use of the Education Center as a resource later. In contrast, in Colonial Town, stakeholders from across the district participated in the diagnostic review process from the start, and we have been able to engage district leaders, teachers and others in building supports for developmentally appropriate practices across the district. In order for the Throughline approach to succeed, the Education Center must position its work, even if apparently limited at first, as necessarily connected to key players working at multiple layers of the system.

Moreover, we believe there is a relationship between the breadth of the work and depth of engagement a district can absorb. In each of our partnerships, it was difficult for us to help districts in building and sustaining broad support across all layers of the system for an instructional initiative. Instead, districts often focused their time with us in one

area, such as in Lakeside’s initiative with principal supervisors, or attended less to one layer than the others, such as in Port City, which in Year Two focused on developing teacher coaches and site leaders, but did not engage teachers directly. We also noted that it was easier to engage multiple layers of the system when the initiative was relatively discrete, as in the case of our early work with Port City to choose an early childhood curriculum. As the work grew more complex, however, it was harder for districts to sustain multi-layered support for a broad initiative. While these partnerships have not existed long enough for us to really understand the longer-term effect of the Throughline, our work with these three districts has emphasized to us the importance of foregrounding the work of teachers and schools in our future partnerships so that student learning is not lost amidst the complexity of district-wide learning and change.

MOVING TOWARD THE SCHOOL AS THE UNIT OF CHANGE: DEVELOPING THE DISTRICT-WIDE INSTRUCTIONAL INI- TIATIVE FRAMEWORK

As we plan the next stage for our growth as an organization and build our muscle to move districts forward, we have identified our strengths, taken seriously our shortcomings, and honed our strategies for working with districts. We are pleased to report that our district partners consistently say that our inquiry-driven approach to district engagement, in which our school district partners co-construct an essential question that guides our work together, is productive. Even in districts where our professional development work has not significantly permeated multiple layers of the system, such as in Lakeside, those with whom we work tell us that they have built their capacity to recognize strong classroom practice and to create some of the conditions that foster it.

We place a high value on cultivating trusting relationships with our partners, by engaging them in inquiry and building tailored professional learning plans for their districts. As a result of those relationships, even when we have not been able to fully engage in our Throughline approach, we have created a climate of awareness, in which our partners recognize that meeting their system-wide instructional goals

“There is a relationship between the breadth of the work and depth of engagement a district can absorb.”

“Schools must take ownership of an instructional vision and create structures within the school, which are supported by the district.”

requires the challenging work of connecting, visioning, project management, PD planning, and evidence and feedback from classrooms (e.g., low-inference observations of teacher practices, a review of student work and data). In these early partnerships, we hypothesized that the experiences of students, teachers, and school leaders needed to be front and center in our district-level work. After our first two years as an organization, that concern is more present in our minds now than ever. What we have come to understand more fully is that even when district leaders recognize the interconnectedness of student learning and organizational structures and systems, it is very difficult to enact thoughtful, district-wide reform. In response, we have developed and refined the Districtwide Instructional Initiatives Framework (DII), that conceptualizes four research-based elements as the interrelated cornerstones of district improvement: 1) the vision and commitment of district leadership, 2) change management structures, 3) intentional adult learning experiences and 4) the use of evidence to improve student learning. The framework seeks to operationalize the Throughline approach, by attending to the concrete elements of district structures that together can support student learning. Critically, the Throughline approach depends upon positioning the school as the unit of change. While district leaders, coaches, principals, teachers and other school staff must have a stake in the district’s vision, schools must take ownership of an instructional vision and create a coherent culture and set of structures within the school supported by the district to enact meaningful shifts in instructional practice. And, that classroom-level change must be driven by evidence of student learning, to improve outcomes for students.

With generous funding from the Gates Foundation, we have convened a network of school districts in New York state, and have supported each of them through an intensive, systematic process of developing an essential question for their districts, designing an instructional improvement initiative, and implementing it. We have foregrounded the importance of positioning the school as the unit of change, and have helped district leaders use the DII framework as a resource for creating the necessary structures and systems in their district to support their instructional initiatives. We are currently documenting this group and intend to publicize our work with our New York districts in a subsequent report.

DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP SUMMARY

	DISTRICT ESSENTIAL QUESTION	EDUCATION CENTER SUPPORTS	DISTRICT GROWTH POINTS	PARTNERSHIP CHALLENGES
PORT CITY	What curriculum resources and accompanying teacher development supports will strengthen instruction across pre-K programs?	District-wide curriculum review committee Professional development with coaches and district leaders	District leadership and staff report higher engagement in instructional decision-making, and increased knowledge of high-quality early childhood practices	Engaging teachers directly in ongoing professional learning
LAKESIDE	How can we build the capacity of our network teams to support standards-aligned instruction across all schools?	Professional learning sessions with principal supervisors (and some building principals) tied to the Common Core Collaborative classroom observational visits	Principal supervisors report increased knowledge of high-quality classroom instruction, coaching practices	District leaders express frustration that classroom practice have not shifted as a result of the principal supervisor professional development
COLONIAL TOWN	How do current resources, practices, and supports align to developmentally meaningful, play-based, trauma-informed approaches to learning?	Conducted collaborative district-wide review Created Professional Learning Map, established Vision Committee Conduct Professional Development for 125 teachers	District is creating a belief statement for early childhood education and is communicating with stakeholders District is aligning professional learning experiences for adults with the district curriculum and best early childhood practices	District turnover and decentralization in pre-K programs District needs intensive support to create professional development resources, tools, and materials

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