

A Pioneering Collaboration to Improve Reading in Central Falls

Christine Wiltshire, Frances Gallo,
and Kath Connolly

An urban school district and a charter school have forged a successful – and unusual – partnership to share best teaching practices and collectively support early reading proficiency.

The Growing Readers Initiative is a professional development partnership between an urban school district and a charter school – one of the few examples nationally of such collaboration. The Learning Community, a K–8 charter school founded in 2004, has developed a coordinated program to build strong readers in the early grades. Through the Growing Readers Initiative, teachers, coaches, specialists, and administrators from the charter school are working alongside their colleagues in the neighboring Central Falls School District to share best practices teacher-to-teacher, share systems of support and data analysis, and encourage a team approach to student achievement.

Growing Readers is a successful, working example of truly targeted, collective practice. Grade-level teams of teachers design targeted lessons by using Rhode Island state standards and the work of the New Standards Project as common measures. Teachers receive coaching in their own classrooms, targeted to their needs and to those of

their students. Quarterly assessments measure the results; students who are struggling are offered tailored support from reading specialists. This layered approach affirms common goals, structures daily practice to be collaborative, and aligns resources to be responsive to clear needs.

The partnership embodies the original promise of the charter school movement – to spur innovation in the larger system of public education. Through Growing Readers, lessons learned in one school reach three times as many students. Initial results are positive, but all partners agree that the work is in its infancy and that relationships, whether on a collegial or institutional level, take time and hard work to grow.

Central Falls

For decades, Central Falls, Rhode Island, has drawn immigrants from many parts of the world to the Blackstone Valley, birthplace of our nation’s industrial revolution. Generations came for work and brought with them talent, determination, intelligence, culture, warmth, and, above all else, their vision for a future for their children. For most families, education is the key to that vision.

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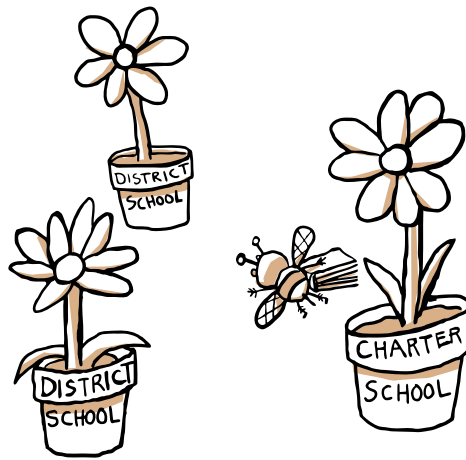
Like urban districts across the country, the schools in Central Falls have struggled to balance a belief in the district's 3,000 students and their families with the challenging effects of poverty. In 2000, 41 percent of the children of Central Falls were living below the federal poverty line – more than half (52 percent) in extreme poverty. The challenges facing the young people of this community are all too familiar to anyone who has worked with low-income urban families in the United States.

Central Falls has some outstanding teachers, committed leaders, and success stories. Families in Central Falls have made great sacrifices to provide for their children. But Central Falls also has a long history of efforts at change and reform that have left a series of piecemeal programs and solutions in their wake.

Frances Gallo became superintendent in 2007, bringing to the district a commitment to transparency and a vision that success was possible through “teamwork coupled with an unwavering focus on improving the intellectual, social, and emotional well-being of every child in every classroom.”

The Learning Community

The Learning Community, the first charter school in Central Falls, was founded in 2004 by Meg O’Leary and Sarah Friedman as an independent district reporting directly to the state. Based on their years of experience working on professional development in Providence public elementary schools, O’Leary and Friedman created a new public school designed to



address the common obstacles urban classroom teachers faced. Their vision was to build the school as a laboratory for professional development – a learning community not just for one school, but for educators throughout the state and the region.

Central to their notion of school success was the role of working collaboratively. The route to student achievement, particularly in a high-poverty community, is through creating a team of support surrounding every classroom, every teacher, and every learner, giving importance to individual voices, systematically making space for dissenting opinions, and committing to continuous reflection and improvement. All members of the school’s team are encouraged to hold one another accountable for their best work through listening, critical feedback, collaborating, and, where necessary, hard conversations.

Over its first five years The Learning Community has shown some impressive results for a school with such high poverty. Students are outperforming their peers on state standardized

tests, the school has the best rate of family engagement in the state, and the demand to become a student or a teacher at the school is high (The Learning Community 2009). Hundreds of visitors have come to the school, drawn by its results on state standardized tests, its groundbreaking work in family engagement, and its reputation as an open school interested in building and sharing new systems to support student achievement.

How the Partnership Began

Superintendent Gallo’s initial interest in The Learning Community grew from her feeling of responsibility toward *all* Central Falls public school children, whether they are in the Central Falls School District or not.

On a summer visit to a Kindergarten family the phone rang and the parents were jumping for joy. They looked at me sheepishly, telling me they just won the lottery to go to The Learning Community. And I said to them “That’s wonderful!” They were shocked. I said, “You’re still my students and by all means I’ll see you when you’re at The Learning Community.” As I was leaving, I thought, why is it that they are so excited to go there? So I decided to visit.

Gallo’s visit led her to arrange a series of open observation days at The Learning Community for principals, district administrators, and classroom teachers. These visits allowed people to observe and discuss instruction at varying grade levels. Many common concerns about charter schools were raised: What is the poverty level? How does your lottery work? Do you have any special education students? Are your teachers certified?

Central Falls and Learning Community leaders realized they had important things in common. Both groups were focused on success for all students. Both had a corps of excellent teachers. And both believed that the fundamental unit of school change is not the state, the district, or the school, but the classroom. Teachers who visited left with an understanding that the same demographic of students attend The Learning Community as the district schools, including those with special education and behavioral needs, students of color, and ELLS (see Figure 1).

	Central Falls School District	The Learning Community
Enrollment	3,000	400
Free and reduced-priced lunch	76%	88%
Students of color	88%	95%
English language learners	22%	20%

Figure 1: Comparison of student characteristics, Central Falls School District and The Learning Community

Conversations began about the role The Learning Community could play as a partner to the Central Falls elementary schools. The conversations quickly focused on reading instruction as a key driver of The Learning Community's success and a fundamental job of the early grades. Diagnostic assessments from the Central Falls elementary schools suggested that their students read accurately and fluently, but their comprehension lagged.¹ Administrators agreed that this gap contributed to students' struggles with state standardized tests, which place an emphasis on comprehension. The Learning Community proposed an initial design based on achieving immediate and tangible results recognizable to classroom teachers and building sustainable systems of support. A pilot was launched in August 2008.

What Is the Growing Readers Initiative?

Unlike many curriculum-based interventions, Growing Readers is not a new "program," but a shift in the way teachers work, the way data are used, and the way extra support is targeted. Drawing on systems successful at The Learning Community, the initiative works on four tracks.

- *Using data to inform instruction.* Every quarter, reading is assessed using nationally known tools that have been adapted for Central Falls. The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) helps identify students who are struggling with reading, without waiting until the

end of the school year. Teachers have learned how to analyze data about students' reading comprehension, fluency, and accuracy and decide what each student needs to continue growing as a reader. Superintendent Gallo observed,

This is really a targeted intervention. Based on data. Based on observation. We all test students, but how many of us really take that test apart and decide what each student needs based on the results?

- *Targeted professional development.* Instructional Coach Christine Wiltshire offers "embedded" coaching based on teacher needs and requests. She works with individual teachers, observing instruction in their classrooms, debriefing her observations with them, and demonstrating lessons in their classrooms while they observe. Teachers are able to see that new instructional strategies will work with their own students in their own classrooms.
- *Supporting excellent instruction: Many styles, one structure.* The Learning Community shares its modified form of Reading Workshop, a technique popularized by Lucy Calkins of Columbia's Teachers College, in the Central Falls district, both as an instructional approach and as a structure for organizing the strategies that build strong readers. Coaches provide lessons plans tested at The Learning Community and then help teachers learn to craft clear

¹ These internal Central Falls Schools District reading assessments are based on data from the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA).



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— Sarah Friedman, co-director,
The Learning Community

lesson plans using the Reading Workshop approach. “The beauty of Reading Workshop is that it is a framework that encourages student independence and allows for targeted instruction at their level,” coach Christine Wiltshire observes.

- *Rapid response for students needing more support.* Based on a similar model at The Learning Community, a reading safety net system has been created at each Central Falls school to offer support from a reading specialist to students who have fallen below benchmark. This support is in addition to regular classroom instruction, so students receive nearly twice as much small-group reading instruction. All reading specialists are learning to run safety net groups, manage quarterly assessments, analyze schoolwide data, and facilitate collaboration with classroom teachers.

This approach has helped teachers at The Learning Community feel that it is possible for them to reach each reader. One third-grade teacher observed,

Schools that are truly dedicated to excellent teaching at some point become deeply aware that it must be the work of many hands. You can’t have multifaceted reading instruction in a single-teacher model, especially with students who are coming in with English language needs.

Learning Community co-director Sarah Friedman said,

There is a sense of a team being behind every teacher. So we’re not expecting that teachers are responsible on their own for reading. There is a reading safety net team that is there to work with students.

Results

In 2009–2010, Growing Readers is reaching every K–2 classroom in all four elementary schools in the district, serving forty-one teachers, three teaching assistants, three reading/literacy specialists, and eight hundred students. To accomplish this, Wiltshire has leveraged the participation of colleagues in numerous roles at The Learning Community to share the work between the two institutions.

It will likely take at least two more years before the collaboration will begin to show results on standardized tests such as the New England Common Assessment Program. Meanwhile, the internal measures used by Growing Readers have shown impressive initial results on the DRA, the formative assessment used by the state in grades K–2. In the pilot school, 86 percent of participating students were reading at or above the national benchmark after six months – a 39 percent gain since the initial baseline results. Between October and January, the percentage of students at or above the national benchmark in reading rose between 5 and 21 percentage points in each school.²

What Is Making Collaboration Work?

The Growing Readers Initiative is as much about collective enterprise as it is about reading. Its very structure requires and encourages collaboration among colleagues within and across schools to support the achievement of every student. Growing Readers has only existed for two years, but there are key elements in place designed to

emphasize the long and steady work of building and strengthening these relationships.

Specificity

The targeted nature of the professional development allows teachers to work closely together and implement quickly. All units, tools, and teaching points are discussed and refined with teachers at a single grade level. All teachers are using similar approaches across classrooms and across grades. The materials, refined at an existing school, don't require extra effort for teachers to use. As Wiltshire said, "It's not something they have to scale back or scale up for their classroom. It's the same thing – our classroom to their classroom."

The more targeted the instruction, the more effective it can be. Wiltshire observed,

What motivates the students is that they are reading at a level that is in their comfort zone. They aren't struggling through every page and every page isn't so easy that it is a waste of time. They feel many moments of success and they can see that they are applying what their teacher taught them.

Authenticity

Learning Community co-director Sarah Friedman said,

The work we are doing is rooted in a real school. Because our approach is developed at an urban school, what we are bringing to teachers in Central Falls is from teachers to teachers. We're speaking the same language.

The Learning Community serves the same demographic populations as the Central Falls public schools, so materials have been created to work

² For more detailed information about these data and the Growing Readers Initiative, see The Learning Community, n.d.

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— Specialist,
The Learning Community

with real urban students. Central Falls teachers can see Wiltshire teach in their own classroom with their own students. Central Falls teachers also have opportunities to observe instruction at their grade level at The Learning Community and see how the various pieces of reading instruction look in another classroom. For Learning Community team members, sharing their work with colleagues requires them to be clear on their practice. As one specialist said, “When you own it, you can teach it.”

Dialogue and Listening

Growing Readers includes multiple layers of dialogue. Coaching debrief sessions, meetings on assessment data, and trainings always include opportunities for reflection and conversation. Learning Community co-director Meg O’Leary observed,

[Christine] listened when the [Central Falls] teachers complained about the myriad of initiatives that have come through their classrooms. When they questioned the reasoning behind each component of the work, Christine took the time to explain. That was the beginning of earning their trust.

By listening intently to teachers and specialists, Wiltshire has identified obstacles to success at a classroom and building level and has been able to advocate for changes. More reading specialists were hired. The schedule was changed to lengthen the reading block, prompting one principal to say, “You moved a mountain!”

Those “bigger picture” changes are also mirrored in conversations about specific lessons. Wiltshire said,

Every time we do a lesson together we debrief afterwards. We talk about what were the teacher moves I made, why I made those moves, what should we do tomorrow, which kids should we target for tomorrow. That one-on-one coaching – I know I really benefited from it as a classroom teacher.

A continuous exchange of ideas has contributed to a culture of continuous improvement at The Learning Community. As one team member observed,

When I think back, it is a trial and error process. We listen to one another’s ideas. You took the good, you left the bad, and you revisited the good and made it better. That is how we have grown.

Respect

In any urban district teachers will talk about the need for respect. As one Central Falls teacher said, “We need to begin with respect that we all have experience and that we all care for the kids.”

As another Central Falls educator described it,

Instead of a scripted, “This is what I have to teach today and this is what comes next,” I can really build off of what I noticed them doing today and how I want to use that to inform my instruction tomorrow.

Teachers are valued as experts, they are listened to, and, as much as possible, the issues they raise are followed up on. Frequently, teachers know what their students need to succeed but do not have the authority to realign resources to meet those needs. Learning Community co-director O’Leary observed,

Understandably, Central Falls teachers became nervous for their students around the time Christine was introducing new quarterly assessments. She listened to their concerns about the number of assessments and the assessment schedule. She looked closely at the schedule. They were right. She made changes to the schedule and further earned their trust. It is simple and yet not very commonplace in large districts. It is what feeds the best kind of relationship between any two people – respect.

Rapid Results

All educators want results for every student in their classrooms. Growing Readers responds to this need for urgency by using assessments to catch students who are not meeting benchmark as early as possible and getting them the extra support they need from a reading specialist. Quarterly data give teachers real evidence to make adjustments to instruction and provide another way to gauge what is working in their classrooms. Seeing results – for both teachers and students – can be enormously motivating.

Superintendent Gallo tied the increased amount of data to a culture of accountability.

Data took away the subjectivity. If the students can’t perform it on the assessment then they need help until they can. ... It’s not about what you think I know, it is about what I can demonstrate I know.

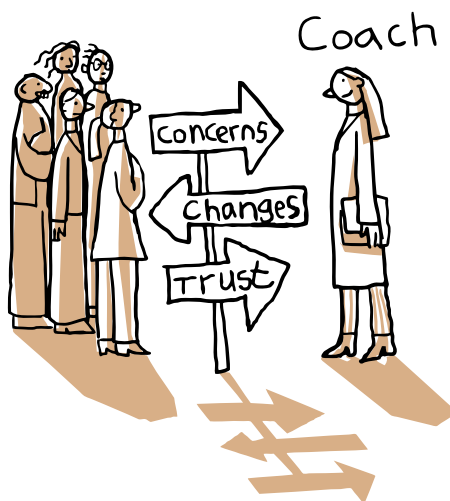
Positive results and progress are motivating both for students and for teachers. As one specialist in Central Falls said, “Doing assessments quarterly allows them to see progress more often. I think teachers do get on board more when they see results.”

Team Approach

In an era when teachers, schools, and districts are being held publicly accountable to numerical outcomes, it can be easy to seek someone to blame if the results aren’t positive. Encouraging a shared sense of accountability and teamwork across schools and between schools and families is essential to the success of urban education.

This notion of teamwork has been a key focus of The Learning Community’s culture. One specialist observed,

I especially feel like a team after assessments and you get the data. I get excited because a teacher will come to me and say, “Did you know a student you are working with went from here to there?” It is because we are a team. Everyone has a piece. You know it is not a one-person success – it’s a team.



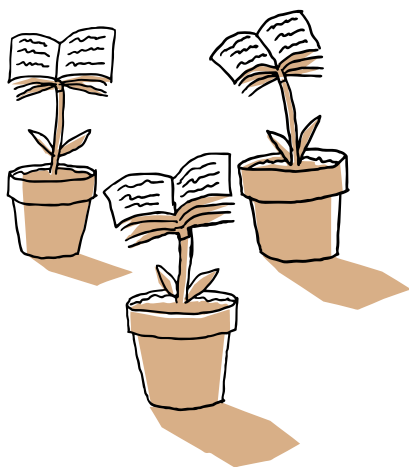
And similar things are happening in Central Falls. As one specialist there noted,

There have been teachers who have come to me to ask what I'm doing with one of their students to learn more about what that is so they can use those strategies in their classroom.

What Is Hard about Working This Way?

A wall of distrust has been built between experienced educators who have worked to repair our nation's urban schools and many of the leaders of the emerging charter school movement. O'Leary observed,

There is historic distrust on the part of public school teachers of new initiatives. That distrust is more than warranted as curriculums and sweeping reform efforts have come and gone with no consultation of teachers themselves as to what their students need. There is then little to show for it but frustrated and overstretched teachers and thoroughly confused students.



Doubts That All Students Can Succeed

Working toward a sense of collective academic achievement requires everyone to believe that the students can succeed. One teacher pointed out,

Success depends on the attitude you have about the kids. . . . If it doesn't work, the question needs to be, "What can I do differently?" not "The student can't do it." . . . The whole point of the tutorial model is that kids are going to need extra support.

Collegiality: One More Thing on the To-Do List

Support from colleagues is almost universally welcomed. But teachers want their students to do well, and collaboration and collegiality can feel like one more thing on a to-do list. One Central Falls educator observed,

You get stuck in, "This is what I have to do and I gotta get it done." But it keeps you fresh if you are always talking to someone else about what you are doing, what went well and what didn't work.

Current discussion nationally about holding individual teachers accountable for results can create an environment that is not conducive to collaboration. As one Central Falls specialist said,

Some people think "This is my classroom, these are my kids," but not realizing that someone else has a classroom with similar kids and similar needs so we should be communicating all the time about what is going on, because it is only going to enhance our practice.

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History of Ineffective Professional Development

Teachers are accustomed to professional development that is not grade specific and not easily used. Teachers have had to do a lot of “unpacking” in order to apply the new ideas to their classroom, with limited support.

Often, a new wave of reform or a new approach is brought in by administrators before teachers are able to see any results from the previous one, often leading to understandable cynicism. As one Central Falls teacher said,

There are buildings with tons of curriculum materials in the basement because it was given to teachers half-way through the year with no chance to figure out how to implement it.

Resource Alignment

Many charter schools have the freedom to manage their own resources, both human and financial, so they are able to place decisions about resource alignment close to the dynamic needs of students and teachers. In contrast, in many urban systems, it is the district that makes decisions about hiring, changes in job responsibilities, curriculum design, and other significant choices. Where possible, Growing Readers advocates for

changes that would remove some of the institutional barriers to change that Central Falls teachers encounter.

Misconceptions

Misconceptions about charter schools and how they operate continue to make it difficult to nurture collaboration with traditional public schools. There are both excellent and struggling charter schools, just as there are excellent and struggling traditional public schools. Nationally, charter schools are a popular current strategy in urban school reform, which can create suspicion on the part of educators, particularly as federal and state policies begin to favor “charter school takeover” as a strategy for school change.

Some Learning Community teachers worry about how their work is being received by their colleagues in Central Falls. One team member said,

I worry that the Central Falls teachers are seeing what we do as, “This is how you should do it” instead of “This is one way to do it.” We aren’t perfect and every classroom is different.

To form an enduring partnership will take considerable time. But there are early signs that the essential goal – clear gains in reading performance for all students – is possible.

The best way to address misconceptions on all sides has been visitation, observation, and honest dialogue. As one Central Falls principal said,

I'm not going to lie; there was animosity at the beginning. Once they were able to sit down and get it out in the open, . . . they aired their feelings, and now everybody works great together.

Vulnerability

Excellence in education is predicated on the quality of the teacher in every classroom. These teachers work in a complicated ecosystem of students, families, and colleagues. Gallo observed, “This is a human endeavor and you touch on human frailties, issues of friendship, and loyalty.”

Collaboration and co-accountability can require professionals to ask one another to accept feedback or constructive criticism. As one Central Falls specialist said,

I am always feeling like I'm not part of the “in group” because sometimes I'll have to look at their data and make a suggestion or ask for an explanation based on the data for one reason or another.

Building a culture that encourages receptivity to constructive criticism requires constant, intentional work on the part of every team member. One Learning Community team member observed,

A culture of continuous improvement can also be exhausting. It is almost like being a really good athlete on a really strong team. No matter how well you do, there is always another race. You never feel like you are done.

In spite of the challenges, the Growing Readers Initiative has worked to build a positive culture that remains focused on the work and on teachers' supporting one another to continuously improve. As one educator said,

When she has had to be constructive with criticism, she comes in with such a professional lens and her points are so clear and gentle that I was so grateful. I was excited to try a different strategy. I want to be teachable.

Looking toward the Future: Sustainable Improvement at Scale

The early progress of the district–charter school partnership in Central Falls is not the stuff of headlines. At the same time that Growing Readers has been achieving quiet successes, as this issue of *Voices in Urban Education* goes to press, Central Falls High School has become the epicenter of a far more

vociferous, national debate about turnaround strategies for low-performing schools.

But the struggles of one school do not occur in a vacuum. By building strong readers in early grades across an entire district, the Growing Readers partnership helps prepare students to succeed for the rest of their school careers – through high school and beyond.

To form an enduring partnership will take considerable time, particularly as the Growing Readers Initiative is just one of many unfolding in the district. But there are early signs that the essential goal – clear gains in reading performance for all students – is possible. Perhaps equally significant is that all constituents are learning new things about working collectively to improve teaching and learning.

References

The Learning Community. n.d. *The Growing Readers Initiative*. Central Falls, RI: The Learning Community. Available for download at <www.thelearningcommunity.com/broadimpact.html>

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Note:

The Annenberg Institute for School reform, which publishes *Voices in Urban Education*, has been asked by Superintendent Frances Gallo to help Central Falls School District engage a wide range of stakeholders in developing an effective and sustainable turnaround plan for Central Falls High School.