



**House Public Education Committee**

*Responses - Interim Charge 1*

*(Question 5-9)*

**Question 5:** The stated purpose of these partnerships with charters was to serve as incubators of innovative ideas in how to turn around failing campuses. Have any successful programs been identified that can be replicated by struggling campuses?

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**Response:**

The School Innovation Collaborative (S-I-C) was launched as a partnership with high-performing school leaders with the purpose of developing, identifying, and scaling best practices in an effort to dramatically improve outcomes for students across Texas. Our [leadership team](#) brings significant turnaround and charter experience to the work. This experience includes a track record of turning around campuses and working with high-performing Texas charter schools such as Uplift Education and YES Prep.

During our first year (2019-2020) of operating four campuses, including two turnaround campuses, across two districts (San Antonio and Brooks County ISDs), we learned a great deal about replicating innovative and effective practices across campuses. These learning are summarized below:

*Developing Effective Leadership Practices: By creating a sense of community, increasing capacity, and implementing action, principal networks show strong trends of changing school cultures and improving student achievement* ([Intrator & Scribner, 2008](#); [UCLA, 2011](#))

Through the partnership, S-I-C has developed The Network Design Lab, a leadership development program to support collaboration across campus leadership teams while working through problems of practice. This collaboration has been critical in accelerating the transfer and effective implementation of best practices across campuses while providing an authentic learning community driven by school leadership. During these sessions, we also collaborate and share resources across districts in a way that would not be possible without the S-I-C partnership.

*Talent Acquisition & Retention: Identifying and maintaining talent is important in any organization, but in a low-performing school, it is perhaps the most important component to achieving turnaround.* ([Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012](#))

One of the S-I-C levers for effective school networks is strong operational systems. This includes systems for sourcing, identifying, and recruiting high-quality staff. Our team focused on developing and codifying hiring practices which dramatically increased the talent at our two turnaround campuses. These practices resulted in the recruitment and selection of a proven turnaround leader who shared vision alignment with the campus and partnership. We were also able to double the number of tier 1 (high-performing) teachers across the campuses.

“I was drawn to Bowden Academy by the mission, vision and values of the charter partnership developed by the campus team. This partnership model gave assurance that as the school leader I would have the resources, empowerment, and network support to do right by kids. Turnaround work is challenging, and we will meet that challenge through a shared vision for campus and a strong partnership.” Venus Davis, Principal & School Turnaround Leader - Bowden Academy

### High-quality Curriculum Selection & Implementation:

S-I-C utilizes high-quality curriculums to support instructional effectiveness. Through summer professional development, S-I-C worked with teachers to identify campus and content area criteria for high-quality curriculum. Collaboratively with educators, high quality curricula were selected and implemented. Additional professional development on curricula was provided. These curricula were more aligned to campus mission and visions, included higher levels of rigor, and better support for differentiating student learning to increase student achievement than current resources. One of the programs selected for all campus locations was Lexia, an adaptive reading program aligned to the Science of Reading. All students across the network have access to Lexia, which supports foundational reading skills and provides individualized lesson plans for struggling students. The curriculum work S-I-C continues to engage in will continue to decrease student learning gaps, while increasing student achievement while leveraging high-quality curriculums.

**Question 6:** Have certain types of new partnerships been more successful than other types of alternative educational arrangements?

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#### **Response:**

One of our core values is to “Find A Way”. This represents the entrepreneurial and solutions-oriented approach it takes to develop, launch, and successfully implement the partnership across multiple campuses. We believe this mindset and skill set combined with the structural advantages of the partnership is critical to developing high-performing organizations and effective schools. As we reflected on our first year, we identified these partnership structures as critical to success:

#### Startup Opportunity

Two of our co-founders, Sonya Mora and Brian Sparks, were district leaders who bring a strong track record of leading innovative and turnaround schools. They have experiences ranging from launching one of the first in-district charter schools in San Antonio based on an innovation year-round calendar and leading one of the most successful nationally recognized turnaround efforts at Gates Elementary, which improved from a “F” in 2015 to a “A” in 2018. Their interest was not to implement the model of an existing charter operator or partner but to collaboratively launch a new organization with similar values and design to meet the needs of the campuses.

#### Strong and Independent Non-Profit Board

The implementation of innovative and new practices within an existing school district requires persistence and a commitment to change management. It has also required clear decision-making authority at the partnership level. The S-I-C board has played a vital role in ensuring that campuses can leverage the autonomies associated with being an in-district charter and that decisions are made in alignment to student outcome goals, recognizing the partnership will be terminated by the districts if we fail to meet the goals. Our board is also charged with the responsibility over staffing, budget, and calendaring, and the board has made significant decisions to move progress toward our goals. One example is the decision to add over 20 instructional days to the calendar at two of our campuses in order to combat summer slide, and we envision using this flexibility across all our campuses for the 2021-2022 school year.

**Question 7:** What type of resources (financial and other types of supports) have been necessary to implement new turn-around partnerships?

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#### **Response:**

Resources have played a critical role in our early success. Of these resources, there have been several financial and non-financial resources deemed necessary upon reflection.

#### Non-Financial Resources

We believe it is critical to partner with districts who share an alignment to the Systems of Great Schools approach. District leadership, in particular, plays a critical role in ensuring alignment of

resources to a partnership approach by giving partners authority to move resources generated by our students in strategic alignment to the school model. Over the course of the year, we have used resources to create positions, such as a Project-based Learning Coordinator, to support a key pillar of the in-district charter design. We have also reallocated leadership time from district-wide professional development to programmatically aligned professional development opportunities.

### Financial Resources

As a new organization operating in new space as a partnership and in-district charter, it has been critical to have access to flexible start-up funding, additional state funding, and district resources. We have leveraged federal school improvement funds accessible through the TEA School Transformation and Action Fund grants. These funds have supported the costs associated with launching a high-quality organization and providing a runway to sustainability. It has also been imperative to have funding available to catalyze new initiatives (ex: leadership professional development and high-quality curriculum) proposed by the partnership to improve outcomes for students.

The additional SB 1882 state funding has also leveled the playing field for the students in our partnership. It has enhanced access to authentic learning opportunities and provided critical acceleration supports such as small group interventions and extended school days. We have also used this funding to provide teachers with professional development around remote learning and literacy instruction that have improved the learning experience in our classrooms and remote classes. Allocating resources to our classrooms for the benefit of our students is a key priority and benefit of our partnership.

**Question 8:** What measures of "success" are being used to know if these partnerships are working and sustainable?

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### **Response:**

#### Partnership Sustainability

The opportunity afforded by the partnership to generate equivalent funding to state-authorized charter schools, such as IDEA or KIPP, has given our leadership the chance to innovate without seeking a new and independent charter from the state. This, ultimately, is allowing for innovation at a fraction of the cost to the state required by newly authorized partnerships. This is important to our team and the long-term sustainability of innovation across the state.

One of the strategic goals of our partnership is also to be financially sustainable off of the non-SB 1882 local, state and federal funding generated by the students served in the partnership. We have worked closely with district staff to enhance financial transparency of available resources and developed an annual budgeting process to help ensure our campuses use resources to meet campus and community needs while trying to find cost saving and efficiency opportunities. In order to make a transition to sustainability, we need our partner districts to make a continued commitment to increased budget autonomy and transparency.

#### Early Success

Our partnership schools, particularly our two turnaround schools, are seeing early success as it relates to academics and parent demand. It has been heartbreaking to not have a chance to demonstrate the progress these campuses and students have made over the course of last year. In the absence of a state assessment, our schools focus on measuring student growth through an adaptive, nationally normed assessment - NWEA MAP. Last year, we measured growth from the beginning of year to mid-year. Both turnaround schools showed tremendous growth compared to prior years with one campus performing in the top quartile of districts and the other in the second quartile. NWEA MAP is correlated to STAAR, and this correlation projected at least one letter grade improvement at each campus.

The partnership has also helped our campuses share their story and vision for the community. We

have been able to accomplish this through investing in our communities, establishing advisory committees, and implementing strong systems for student recruitment and retention. This promotion, combined with increased performance, has resulted in a waitlist at our turnaround schools, and we feel confident that we have only just scratched the surface for authentic engagement with our communities.

This early success has been validated by being one of the few partners demonstrating the ability to expand impact. For the 2020-2021 school year, our collaborative has added two campuses (one through a parent and staff petition). Our goal is to continue to invest in systems that will allow for us to continue to scale while increasing quality.

**Question 9:** Can programs that have been deemed successful at these low-rated campuses be replicated at other campuses within the district? If not, why? If yes, have similar results in increased student achievement been realized?

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**Response:**

The partnership in and of itself has created a foundation for dramatic and sustainable success at our campuses. Our teachers were drawn to the partnership because the partnership demonstrates a 5 to 10-year commitment to a unified vision. Historically, teachers at our turnaround schools articulated frustration with continual changes in leadership and direction. The contractual promise of consistency has brought optimism and set conditions for continuous improvement.

“I am excited that our vision will remain the same. I am tired of new leadership and new direction every year. Our students and staff need the consistency to implement programs effectively.” Cameron Elementary Teacher

We also want to highlight two innovation programs that have promoted improvement and demonstrate promise for replication. The first is our internally developed Network Design Lab. This campus leadership program described under question 5 has allowed for cross collaboration that would not be possible without the inter-district partnership. We have already launched the Network Design Lab session for the current year and added new participants. The second is the creation of cross-campus professional learning communities (PLCs) and professional development opportunities. These structures allow for teachers to collaborate around topics related to curriculum, student data, and social emotional learning. We are also able to utilize diverse talents and support one another in a way that is unique and supportive to individual and collective practice. Once again, this would not be possible without the protected and targeted professional learning space across S-I-C schools through the partnership.