Marshall Street

Beyond Trust Falls: Launching a Network of Charter Districts During a Global Health Crisis

Spring 2022

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Executive Summary

America's public school system is struggling to meet the needs of Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. Students holding these intersectional identities experience the adverse effects of systemic racism, ableism, and classism embedded within school structures. The long-term impact on these students' futures is staggering; approximately 65 percent of Black, Latinx, and Native American students with disabilities graduate high school, compared with 76.7 percent of white students with disabilities.[1]

Additionally, only 30 percent of teachers feel they have the knowledge and tools to be successful with students with learning and attention issues.[2] Furthermore, the research sector is lacking in applied research about evidence-based interventions for students at this specific intersection, limiting schools' ability to better serve and support students.

To reverse these trends and advance outcomes for Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched the Charter Students with Disabilities Pilot Community. Leveraging the power of continuous improvement as its foundational framework, this community is working towards a collective goal: **By June 15, 2023, each charter district will achieve dramatic gains in the learning experiences, environment, and outcomes for Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty.**

Why Continuous Improvement?

Ultimately, continuous improvement leads to systemic and sustainable change because it directly engages those most impacted in the decision-making and the broader process. Educators can uncover practices in classrooms that work in their context and scale the practices school-wide and across multiple schools to positively impact all students. Continuous improvement is the practice of looking at problems as part of a system, testing assumptions and potential solutions to these problems in a cyclical process, and quickly evaluating outcomes.

About the Pilot Community

Ten high-performing charter districts across the country joined the Pilot Community, along with leading organizations who provide expertise and support. **Marshall Street** was selected to lead continuous improvement efforts in the Pilot Community, providing guidance on practices and managing community activities. **SWIFT Education Cente**r was selected to build the capacity of school leaders and hold a series of equity leadership sessions. **RTI International, SRI International,** and **National Implementation Research Network (NIRN)** joined as evaluators, providing data collection and research expertise.

The Pilot Community is a multi-year initiative divided into three phases: Getting Ready to Launch, Implementing Improvement Plans, and Sustaining and Expanding Impact. This paper will focus on the first phase, Getting Ready to Launch, which took place between the end of 2019 through Summer 2021. During this phase, the Pilot Community developed processes and frameworks for collaboration. It also faced immense challenges and events, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted schools and the lives of countless students, especially our most vulnerable.

During the beginning of the pandemic, over 50 million students were sent home to shelter in place. The Pilot Community's target population of students—**Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, and students experiencing poverty—were disproportionately affected by the pandemic**.[4, 5] Despite this setback, Marshall Street took steps to support the charter districts by shifting focus to building trust, relationships, capacity, and credibility during a time of crisis.

Redwood City, CA
• Summit Public Schools

Oakland, CA
• KIPP Northern California

Los Angeles, CA
• Ednovate
• Green Dot Public Schools
• STEM Prep

Denver, CO
• STRIVE Prep

Chicago, IL
• Noble Schools

New Orleans, LA
• Collegiate Academies

Philadelphia, PA
• Mastery Charter Schools

New York City, NY
• Uncommon Schools

Furthermore, the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, and the resulting national racial reckoning, greatly impacted how the Pilot Community developed improvement plans. The event shined an additional light on the systemic inequities students, particularly Black students, faced at schools and pushed the Pilot Community to reflect on their plans and make shifts needed to disrupt the status quo. Although there were challenges, the Pilot Community learned what it takes to create a strong continuous improvement foundation and build resilience.

Key Themes

Three key themes emerged within the Pilot Community's experience that can inform others' efforts:

1. Systems-level improvement work should be centered on students positioned furthest from opportunity within the education system.

The education system underserves Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, and students experiencing poverty. Students in this intersection often face low expectations and are denied access to college, trade, and career. To support the development of equitable school systems, the Pilot Community is marrying the approach of targeted universalism to continuous improvement. In targeted universalism, resources and efforts are focused—or targeted—towards a particular group who is disadvantaged within a system, with the belief that everyone will benefit from those efforts.

2. Continuous improvement is uniquely well-suited for addressing systemic barriers to equity.

The public school system creates barriers for Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. Systematic barriers in education are highly contextual and vary from school to school. Continuous improvement is useful for addressing practices and policies within specific contexts because teachers drive the improvement efforts in their classrooms. While continuous improvement values context, it also tests research-based practices across contexts to be able to spread what works for students from one school to another.

3. Continuous improvement is adaptive during times of change, and its processes rely heavily on community, people, and relationships.

Continuous improvement is focused on two key factors: (1) problem solving and (2) change management. Both require high degrees of collaboration, and effective collaboration requires trust. The COVID-19 pandemic made developing trust and relationships more difficult. While building trust and relationships is more difficult in virtual environments, it can be done through well-designed network activities.

This is only the beginning of the Pilot Community's journey. In the next two years, we will learn more about how each charter district's improvement work will impact the Black and Latinx students with disabilities at their schools. We will share more about the successes, failures, and key learnings as the Pilot Community enters the second phase of their work.

The American Public School System and the Pilot Community's Target Population

"Targeted universalism is an approach that supports the needs of the particular while reminding us that we are all part of the same social fabric."

- *Targeted Universalism Policy & Practice* by john a. powell, Stephen Menendian, Wendy Ake

The Charter Students with Disabilities Pilot Community was developed to address a complex and pressing problem in the American school system. Public schools across the country are failing to meet the diverse needs of students—particularly those positioned farthest from opportunity.

To support this goal, the Pilot Community is weaving a targeted universalism approach with continuous improvement. **Targeted universalism is an approach in which resources and efforts are focused—or targeted—towards a particular group within a system, with the belief that *everyone* will benefit from those efforts.** The Pilot Community aims to make dramatic gains in the learning experiences, environment, and outcomes of Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty.

The next page offers a snapshot of how the education system underserves Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, and students experiencing poverty.

- Students with disabilities are twice as likely as their peers to be suspended or expelled, and three times more likely to dropout of school.[6]

- According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), only 30 percent of teachers feel they can be successful with students with learning and attention issues.[7]

- Black and Latinx students are less likely to graduate from high school as their white peers. In the 2018-19 school year, 79.6 percent of Black students and 68.2 percent of Latinx students graduated from high school compared with 89 percent of their White peers.[8]

- In 2019, over 11 million children in the United States were in families living in poverty.[9] Students from lower income families are 5 times more likely to dropout of high school than their peers.[10]

2019 Graduation Rates
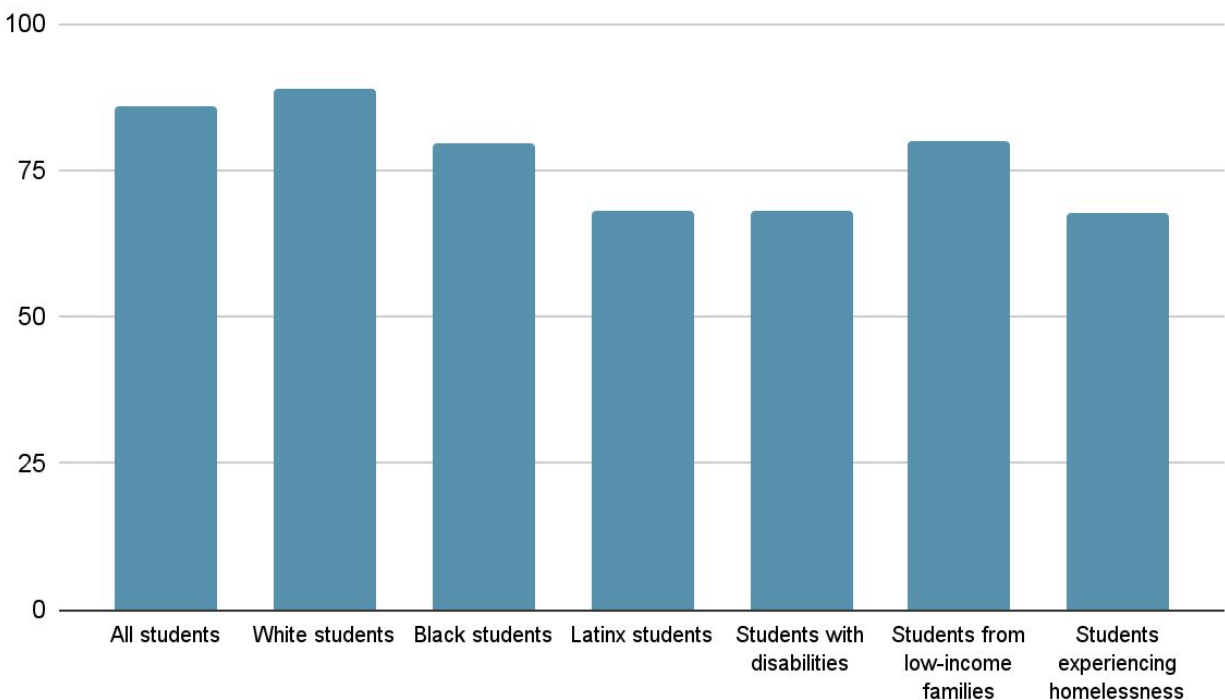
Source: "2021 Building a Grad Nation Report." America's Promise.
https://www.americaspromise.org/report/2021-building-grad-nation-report

Students with disabilities are placed in inequitable learning environments. When students with disabilities are denied access to general education settings or miss weeks of school due to inequitable disciplinary practices, their opportunities to socialize with their peers and gain grade-level skills are dramatically impacted.

- In 2019-2020, 7.3 million students in the United States (or 14 percent of public school students) were identified as students with disabilities through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).[11]
- In 2018, only 64 percent of students with disabilities spent 80 percent or more of their school days in general education classes.[12]
- Learning time is disproportionately lost for students with disabilities, as 19 percent of students with disabilities miss three or more weeks of school each year, compared with 13 percent of their peers.[13]

Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty are impacted by systemic ableism, racism, and classism. They are denied access to college and career curriculum and do not receive sufficient support to obtain a high school diploma and pursue their dreams.

- In the 2016-17 school year, about 65 percent of Black, Latinx, and Native American students with disabilities graduated with high school diplomas, compared with 76.7 percent of white students with disabilities.[14]
- In the 2018-19 school year, 16 percent of Black students, compared to 14 percent of white students, received services under IDEA. Additionally, more Black students were categorized as students with an Emotional Disturbance, compared to all students categorized under the same designation.[15]

Where Students with Disabilities Are Learning
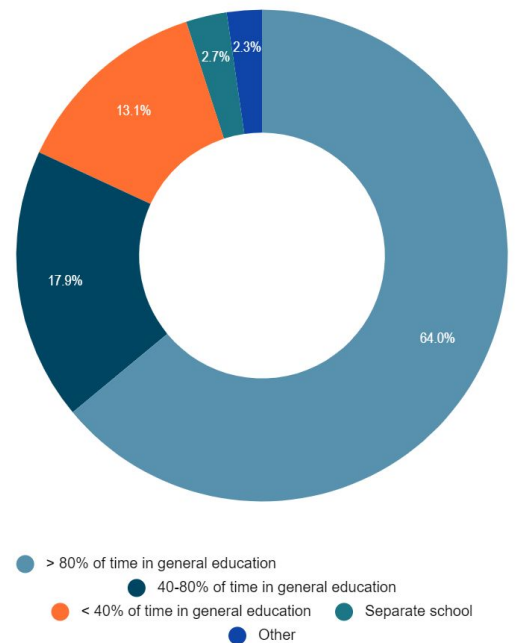
Source: U.S. Department of Education. 42nd Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Parts B and C. 2020. https://sites.ed.gov/idea/files/42nd-arc-for-idea.pdf.

The Pilot Community believes that by bringing the experience of students who are most marginalized in the education system to the center of its efforts, the entire system will improve for _all_ students. Leveraging its previous work and success with continuous improvement, Marshall Street used a targeted universalism approach to improve college readiness for English Learners in the 2016-17 school year. By April 2017, the performance gap between English Learners and non-English learners decreased by 50 percent, even as the performance of non-English learners increased.

The Pilot Community is using a similar approach to advance outcomes for their target population of students. However, there is limited practical literature and available resources on how to best support Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. While many researchers have individually studied the outcomes of students by race, socioeconomic class, and ability status, there is little applied research about interventions to support students at the intersection. Through continuous improvement, educators can uncover promising practices that work in the context of their classrooms and share those practices beyond their classrooms so that others may benefit. In this way, communities of educators—with support from data scientists, content experts, and continuous improvement process experts—are leading the way towards more equitable schooling environments.

The Heart of Continuous Improvement

"Equity should be at the heart of continuous improvement. Therefore, continuous improvement must consider changes to policies and practices within the community context."

- "Building a Culture of Continuous Improvement," Education Development Center [17]

Continuous improvement is uniquely well-suited for creating more equitable school systems. Centered on the ability of educators to uncover promising practices in the classroom, it allows educators to drive improvement work and dismantle systemic barriers in the specific context of their schools.

Growth of Continuous Improvement in Education

In recent years, continuous improvement gained traction in the education community. The growing popularity of continuous improvement in education is due in part to the Every Student Succeeds Act, which encourages schools to develop their own plans for improvement within the contexts of their schools instead of relying on federal strategy.[18] A 2017 paper from AdvancED states that "more than 250,000 classrooms demonstrate strong relationships between effective continuous improvement practices and high performance."[19] ***Educators use continuous improvement to answer the question, "What works, for whom and under what set of conditions?"*** [20]

Traditionally, researchers at universities and other institutions set the agenda for research and recruit teachers to help.[21] Through continuous improvement, teachers and other school staff—the people closest to the problem—get to define research problems and recruit data scientists, families, and other supporters to create solutions that best fit their context.

Educators at schools become the "research engine" that uncovers promising data-driven practices.[22] They take practices with an emerging evidence base, implement these practices in their classrooms, and systematically test them through Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles to track data and build evidence.[23] This allows educators to be trailblazers in developing evidence-based solutions that are inherently practical and systemic in nature. Although there is little applied research on interventions that support Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty, continuous improvement allows charter districts in the Pilot Community to distill data-driven practices that work for their schools.

Additionally, continuous improvement values collaborative learning and knowledge sharing by forming a *Networked Improvement Community (NIC)*, or a community of educators that come together to learn and tackle shared problems of practice in education. According to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, NICs are an "effective and efficient way to build expertise and organize improvement efforts." [24] The Pilot Community is one example of a NIC.

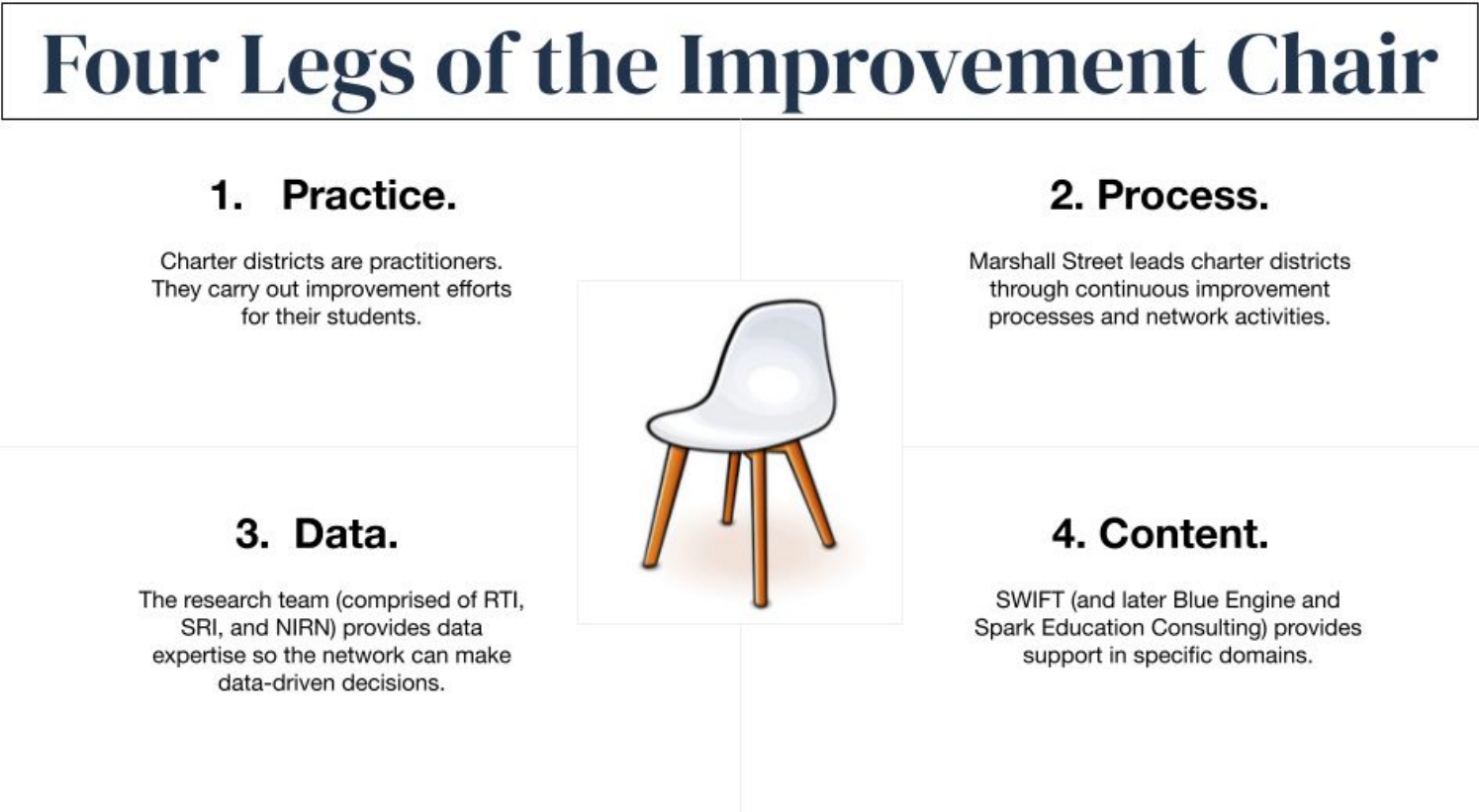## Developing a Networked Improvement Community

The Pilot Community hosts 10 high-performing charter districts. Those charter districts span the country and represent students and schools in a variety of different geographic contexts. When developing the Pilot Community, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation chose to use charter districts because of their function as laboratories of innovation in the public school sector. Charter schools have more latitude to test systemic changes, which is conducive for practicing continuous improvement. In turn, they can share their learnings with the broader public school community across the country to benefit all students.

In addition to the charter districts, the Pilot Community includes experts in continuous improvement processes, data collection, and emerging practices in education. The Carnegie Foundation recommends that networks include members "from organizations representing diverse sites of practice" to support the development of new ideas and provide expertise.[25] The charter districts are the most critical members of the community; they are working with students and have a direct impact on their success. However, without the right support, their continuous improvement efforts could falter.

Improvement Chair Framework

To provide support for each charter district, Marshall Street developed the "Improvement Chair" framework. Marshall Street hypothesized that charter districts are experts in their organizations and students—they are experts in practice and will be carrying out improvement efforts. However, the charter districts need support in additional areas: setting up the most appropriate processes for continuous improvement, structuring data collection and evaluation, and bringing in content expertise for interventions and practices in education.

The Improvement Chair has four legs to support improvement for students at each charter district. Members from each "leg" have regular touchpoints to drive forward improvement efforts at school sites:

Four Legs of the Improvement Chair

1. Practice.

Charter districts are practitioners. They carry out improvement efforts for their students.

2. Process.

Marshall Street leads charter districts through continuous improvement processes and network activities.

3. Data.

The research team (comprised of RTI, SRI, and NIRN) provides data expertise so the network can make data-driven decisions.

4. Content.

SWIFT (and later Blue Engine and Spark Education Consulting) provides support in specific domains.

1.   Practice

Each charter district has an **Improvement Team** focused on carrying out improvement efforts for their students. The Improvement Team members are the experts of their organization, students, and educational contexts. They are the practitioners in the network, and the work will ultimately take place, succeed, and endure because of their efforts.

2.   Process

Marshall Street partners with charter district Improvement Teams to provide expertise on continuous improvement practices, tools, and processes. Marshall also hosts network events that accelerate community learning and manages the vetting of content experts who can meet the needs of charter district Improvement Teams.

3.   Data

The Pilot Community formed a research team with experts from RTI, SRI, and NIRN. The research team conducts measurement activities. Additionally, some members of the research team support Marshall and the charter district teams in tooling, professional development, and data visualization and analysis.

4.   Content

As Improvement Teams identify their focus areas, content experts are brought in to provide support in specific emerging practices, such as Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), literacy, and co-teaching practices. As charter districts identified their focus areas, experts in literacy, MTSS, transition planning, and co-teaching were contracted by Marshall. ***With content expertise and support, the Pilot Community can test changes that are at the frontier of knowledge, practice and evidence-based research.***

In addition to providing support for charter districts as they make progress in test sites, the Pilot Community seeks to scale promising practices across the network and share learnings with the field of education. The Improvement Chair provides support for this goal by bringing experts together to provide targeted support and develop **change packages**. Change packages are the products of continuous improvement; they are the tools, practices, and routines developed from testing change ideas and are used to codify and spread learnings.

The Pilot Community is also forming other structures to support the development of change packages. In Summer 2021, the community launched **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)** for three focus areas: **co-teaching, MTSS, and differentiation in literacy**. The Pilot Community will use the learnings and practices shared in these PLCs to develop change packages.

Forging a Community During a Global Pandemic

"Change moves at the speed of trust."
- *Steven Covey*

"The Exploration Stage is a critical starting place when States, communities, local organizations, and others are considering change. Taking the time to explore what to do, how to do it, and who will do it saves time and money and improves the chances for success."
- *NIRN, Module 4: Implementation Stages* [26]

In March 2020, just a few months after the Charter Students with Disabilities Pilot Community was established, the COVID-19 Pandemic hit. The students in the Pilot Community—along with over 50 million others across the country—were sent home to shelter in place without any idea of when they would return to school.[27] Instead of developing an improvement plan for the following school year, the Pilot Community addressed the immediate needs of students in the target population, many of whom were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Likewise, Marshall Street shifted their priorities to support the needs of charter districts, providing rapid response assistance to schools. Marshall Street also redefined its focus to building trust, relationships and capacity, putting people first in a time of crisis to set the community up for success in the long term. This focus informed key network leadership decisions, capacity-building events, and planning cycles during the pandemic. Next is a discussion of this process.

How COVID-19 Affected Black and Latinx Students with Disabilities Experiencing Poverty

- Black and Latinx students experiencing poverty were less likely to have internet access at home. [28]

- Students with disabilities were pulled away from in-person learning interventions, supports, and resources they received in schools. [29]

- The COVID-19 virus spread more quickly and infected more people in high-poverty neighborhoods, adding stress to students living in these areas. [30]

Building Trust Amid the Pandemic

The Policy Analysis for California Education identifies a "culture of trust" and "preparation and mobilization of improvement capacities" as two of the four enabling conditions for continuous improvement.[31] The Carnegie Foundation notes that "building social connections" and "relational trust" are two key dimensions for structuring roles and relationships in a network and notes that trust is difficult to build in the early stages of network development.[32] Additionally, change management relies heavily on building relationships; "The Water of Systems Change" names "relationships & connections" as a condition for systems change.[33] Therefore, trust and relationships are critical to the success of a networked improvement community.

During the COVID-19 pandemic,the Pilot Community was challenged to build trust and relationships while managing a historic educational crisis and operating fully remote. As events and activities moved online, the Pilot Community's work was made more difficult. Although Marshall Street conducted site visits for a handful of charter districts before the COVID-19 lockdown, most of the people in the network had never met in person. Marshall needed to, therefore, create intentional ways for the Pilot Community to engage with each other.

Providing Rapid Response Support - March 2020

During the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Marshall Street began providing rapid response support to charter districts and developing distance learning resources. The rapid response resources provided valuable support to charter districts in a time of crisis. Focusing on the immediate needs of the charter districts helped strengthen relationships between Marshall Street and Improvement Teams.

A project sponsor for Green Dot shared, "We've been sharing [the resources] with our teams. We used the one on Accommodations and Modifications and added specific Green Dot info. We are using the Educator Growth [resource] with our Coaches this week."

The COVID-19 rapid response resources were made available for schools outside of the network looking for guidance and used by organizations across the country. Over 4,000 resources were downloaded in Spring and Fall 2020. The resources Marshall Street developed also helped build the distance learning field at a critical time.

Adding a Planning Year - March 2020

Marshall Street proposed adding a year to the Pilot Community's timeline. With charter districts in crisis, they would not realistically be able to meet the milestones set for 2020. Furthermore, changes in school systems should be planned for, and integrated at, the beginning of the school year. As the pandemic continued and schools experienced constant change, it was unlikely they would be able to develop solid improvement plans for the 2020-21 school year. Adding a year to the timeline was a pragmatic decision. It also provided time for the community to develop relationships and trust and build capacity for Improvement Teams while tending to the immediate needs of their students.

Furthermore, the planning year served as the exploration stage for the improvement efforts. NIRN's model for implementation stages begins with exploration. According to NIRN, the exploration stage is critical because "creating readiness is an important function when the goal is to reach all individuals being served."[34] The planning year allows schools time to deeply explore the root causes for the systemic barriers impacting Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty.

Starting Collaboration Events - Summer 2020

Marshall Street kicked off a series of virtual collaboration events for community members to talk and learn from each other. During these events, charter districts shared best practices for teaching during the pandemic, which helped build community and weak ties.

While "strong ties" are connections to people we interact with daily, "weak ties" are connections to those we interact with less frequently. Research has shown that weak ties benefit network development and community learning by "providing access to new information, supports, and opportunities." [35] With most interpersonal interactions moving online, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more difficult to develop weak ties.[36]

The series of virtual collaboration events Marshall Street hosted allowed Improvement Team members from different charter districts to interact, build on weak ties, and share new ideas. When the research team evaluated the efficacy of these events, they found that Pilot Community members greatly appreciated them. One participant said:

> "I think the most helpful [activity] that I can think of would be the cross-CMO collaboration day that we do on Fridays... I will literally redo my schedule to go to those because I learn a lot from other [charter districts]."

Revising Project Plans - August 2020

Charter districts regrouped and revised their improvement project plans in August 2020. In the wake of George Floyd's murder, Black Lives Matter protests arose across the country, shining a spotlight on systemic inequities. As the Pilot Community revised their plans, they evaluated inequities in their school systems. Some networks focused on changing their disciplinary practices, which disproportionately affected Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. Others identified ways to shift grading practices to focus more on equity-based grading. Improvement Teams aligned on priorities for the year ahead, enrolling each team member in their roles and responsibilities to reach their Aim.

Each Improvement Team has defined roles for improvement leads, project sponsors, data leads, focal school leaders, and special education leaders. According to the Carnegie Foundation, people who identify with their role and understand its importance are "more likely to have positive feelings about conforming to role expectations defined by the community." [37] By taking the time to get clear on roles and responsibilities, Improvement Team members are more likely to be committed to the work, leading to more effective Improvement Teams.

Hosting the First Convening for Charter Districts - March 2021

Marshall hosted the first Convening for the Pilot Community in March 2021. During this event, Improvement Team members from all the charter districts gathered for the first time. The Convening had five core objectives: alignment, commitment, improvement, relationships, and inspiration. Each charter district was also expected to develop a draft of a Project Charter, or a roadmap for implementing improvement plans at school sites.

This event was highly successful, and the success was due in part to the preparation and work Improvement Teams put in during the planning year. During the Convening, participants took a survey to share their feedback and experiences.

March 2021 Survey Results

- **100% of charter districts** left the convening with agreed-upon Problem Statements, Aims, and draft Primary Drivers (as well as a starting list of Change Ideas).
- **98% of respondents** agreed with the statement: "I am clear on what my roles and responsibilities are related to this work in the coming years."
- **100% of respondents** agreed, "I made a new connection with someone across our network"
- **100% of respondents** agreed, "I'm leaving excited about our work related to our network moving forward"

The survey results and other feedback from participants consistently showed that the Convening was successful in achieving its objectives. By the end of the event, all 10 charter districts left with drafts of their Project Charters.

Finalizing Project Charters - Summer 2021

By Summer 2021, every charter district in the Pilot Community held a formal Project Charter launch meeting. This event signaled the end of the exploration stage in the Pilot Community's improvement journey. All 10 charter districts were ready to launch testing cycles at the beginning of the 2021-22 school year. Despite the hardships that charter districts endured during the 2020-21 school year, the Improvement Teams remained committed to the project and were able to get alignment on their plans for the next year.

What's Next

In the first phase, the Pilot Community focused on creating a strong support system for charter districts so they have the capacity and confidence to carry out improvement efforts in the next two years to make dramatic gains for Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. The community has successfully moved into the next phase of the initiative: **Implementation**.

In the Implementation phase, the charter districts take the plans they developed during the exploration stage and begin testing changes to see what works for students and what does not. The Pilot Community held its second Convening during September 2021 to kick off the implementation phase. The Convening emphasized three main themes: taking action, leaning into collaboration, and keeping the improvement work at the center of our collective efforts, not a separate project.

Taking Action

During the planning year, the charter districts explored the barriers that Black and Latinx students with disabilities were encountering at their school and used their learnings to create a Project Charter, or a plan for improvement work. As part of their Project Charters, each charter district had to identify a set of change ideas to test for the next school year. As the Pilot Community enters the implementation stage, the charter districts are launching PDSA cycles to test the ideas and learn how they impact students in their school sites.

Leaning into Collaboration

To position charter districts for success, Marshall Street is organizing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). During the planning year, charter districts identified their focus areas for the upcoming school years, and they are beginning to self-select into learning communities for co-teaching, differentiation in literacy, and Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). The PLCs officially launched during the network's second Convening and are led by a content expert in each of the three domains. The PLCs are designed to accelerate learning in each domain, as members learn from each other with guidance from the content expert.

The Improvement Work Is *THE* Work

To position charter districts for success, Marshall Street is organizing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). During the planning year, charter districts identified their focus areas for the upcoming school years, and they are beginning to self-select into learning communities for co-teaching, differentiation in literacy, and Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). The PLCs officially launched during the network's second Convening and are led by a content expert in each of the three domains. The PLCs are designed to accelerate learning in each domain, as members learn from each other with guidance from the content expert.
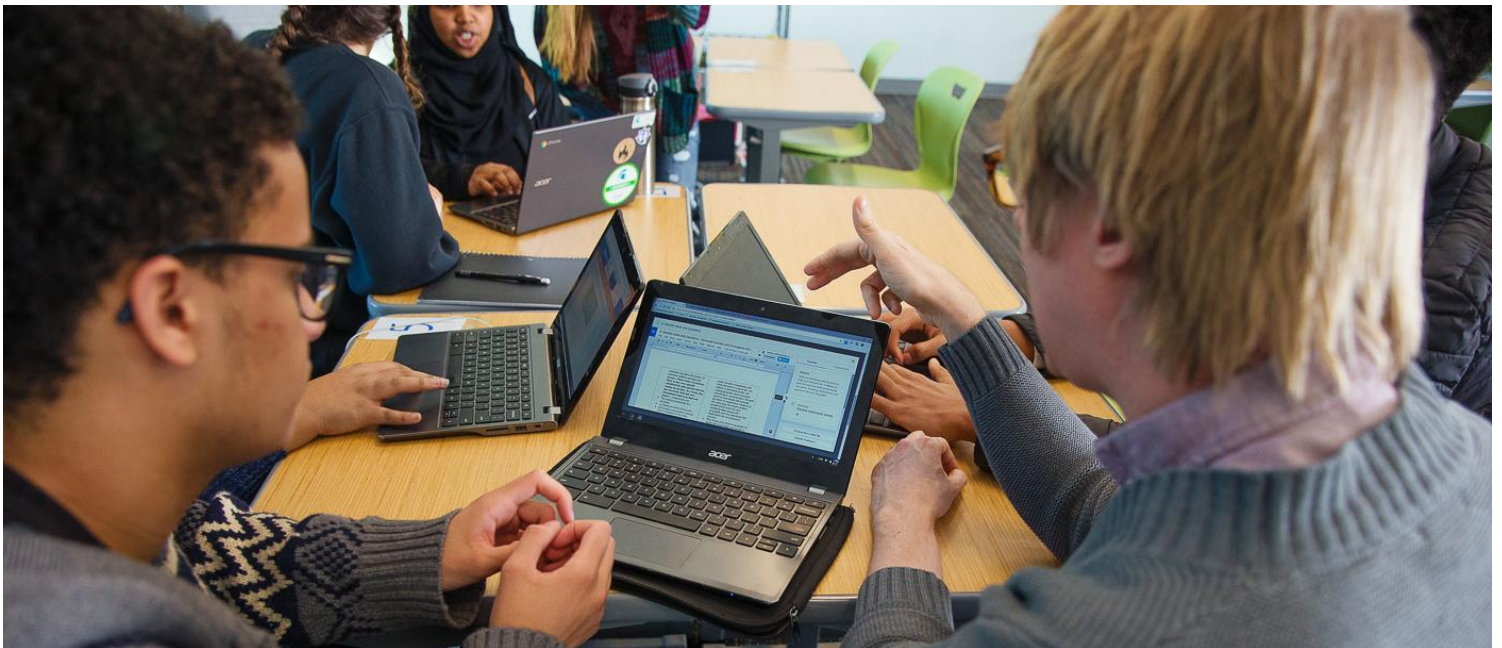
While the charter districts are well prepared for the implementation stage, there are several threats that could undermine the Pilot Community's success. One of the threats is the high turnover of Improvement Team members and school staff. Because the network focused on building relationships with people after the onset of the pandemic, people leaving the network threatens the foundation of the trust built during the planning year. While teacher turnover was already a concern before the pandemic, the additional stresses of adapting to constantly changing teaching circumstances and increased responsibility may exacerbate the problem. Before the pandemic, the teacher turnover rate was 16 percent.[38] In a survey conducted by RAND Education and Labor in January 2021, nearly 1 in 4 teachers expressed a desire to leave their jobs.[39] The Pilot Community has already experienced turnover in Improvement Teams.

Another situation that could undermine the network's success are the lasting implications of the pandemic. School staff have taken on more responsibilities, such as monitoring COVID-19 safety protocols, teaching in multiple learning modes (e.g. hybrid, virtual, in-person), and providing mental health support.[40] Some schools in the Pilot Community had planned to reopen, but reversed the decision as Delta Variant outbreaks surged in their communities. The added responsibilities and stress can take attention away from the improvement efforts.

Conclusion

Although the public school system underserves Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty, educators and schools can be empowered to address systemic barriers. Continuous improvement enables educators to uncover promising practices that work in their specific school context. The Charter Students with Disabilities Pilot Community is using continuous improvement to advance outcomes for Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. In the first phase of this project, the Pilot Community developed processes and frameworks for collaboration, but also faced great challenges, most notably the COVID-19 Pandemic which disrupted schools and student learning across the country. In collectively launching this work, the Pilot Community uncovered these key themes:

1. **Systems-level improvement work should be centered on students positioned furthest from opportunity within the education system.**

2. **Continuous improvement is uniquely well-suited for addressing systemic barriers to equity.**

3. **Continuous improvement is adaptive during times of change, but its processes rely heavily on community, people, and relationships.**

The next phase of the project is Implementation. During Implementation, charter districts will use the improvement plans they developed to test and iterate on changes in schools. They will begin learning what works and what doesn't work in their contexts. Over the next two years, we will follow their efforts and share the Pilot Community's journey.

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