Evolving Practices in Growth Support: Recommendations for Implementing Cohort-Based Charter School Development Supports

This paper explores the structure and implementation of various charter school growth cohort models developed by the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA). CCSA defines cohorts as groups of charter school leaders (leaders of existing charter schools or those interested in starting a charter school) grouped by anticipated start date, regional location and/or needs.

Through documentation of best practices and lessons learned emerging from CCSA's experiences leading four different types of growth support cohort-based programs, and informed by the research literature on collaborative learning and cohort models, this paper identifies the following key takeaways: (1) the cohort program design is essential to ensuring the successful sharing of content, skills, and capacities, (2) structured supports are critical to foster effective networking, and (3) accountability and evaluation are key to increasing participant capacity and program quality. CCSA's lessons learned implementing cohort-based growth programs can be a support to others seeking to adapt these lessons to increase the quality and quantity of new charter schools in their own unique contexts.

CONTEXT & HISTORY

As part of California's public school system, charter schools are helping to advance issues of equity, opportunity and access. Charter schools serve all students, with particular urgency to provide the state's most historically underserved and vulnerable students with a high-quality public education. Charter schools in California outperform traditional public schools for most subgroups across English Language Arts and serve proportionally more Black and low income students than traditional public schools. CCSA supports the development of new charter schools in order to serve more students in need and maintain the impact of charter schools through high-quality charter school growth.

Over the last decade, CCSA has offered charter school development teams a range of support via resource samples and templates, individual consultations, and grouped cohort models. This included a range of supports from basic "how to start a school" information available on CCSA's public Developer Landing Page, to one-to-one, membership-based regionalized supports. CCSA provided content-specific live and recorded workshops, tools and templates, and sample documents and policies. Each developer team was assigned to a regionally-based School Development specialist who provided additional customization and guidance. Prior to submission of a charter petition to an authorizer, CCSA developer members received full petition reviews and petition resource guides to influence content quality and adherence to legal requirements. Developer teams that reached capacity markers and completed a successful petition review received advocacy support throughout the petitioning process.

In line with national trends, over the last six years, California has seen a decline in the number of new charter schools opening each year. The overall charter climate has shifted, making it more difficult to get new petitions approved in many areas of the state. This has led school teams to seek alternative approaches to growth. In response to the evolving needs of developer teams, and based on research and experiences, CCSA used the cohort model to maximize supports, fuel school development, and prioritize connection and community as a way to reinforce quality. While there were differences among the implemented models, CCSA cohort approaches were rooted in the belief that schools working together will be more likely to successfully open and improve the quality of public education in California. According to the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, cohorts in particular provide the following:

- Collaborative learning opportunities
- Support for self-discovery
- A community of concern
- A concrete form of support
- An increased sense of belonging and decreased feelings of isolation
- Opportunities to share goals and to learn about others' goals and feelings
- A safe haven for learning about other people's experiences, ideas, perspectives, and expertise
- Information and ideas, which can be used in service of self-understanding and self-expansion

In light of this research, as well as the needs of charter school developer teams and the deep knowledge and experiences of staff, CCSA has created and launched four formal cohort groups within the past seven years—with various purposes and outcomes—but always borne from the need to encourage and support high quality charter school growth. The next section of the paper provides more detail on each of the four cohort models.

COHORT MODELS

99 Accelerator (2015-2017)

Purpose
The 99 Accelerator's (named for the Highway 99 corridor that connected participating schools) purpose was to support growth, leadership, and political strategy for the San Joaquin Valley as well as to, in part, increase the capacity of high-quality charter schools in identifying and developing excellent school leaders of color.

Theory of Action
The theory of action proposed that by creating and facilitating regionally-based cohorts, providing networking, relationship development, and access to content expertise via other experienced charter management organization leaders and professionals, then school leaders could learn from and support each other, effectively increasing cohort member capacity, advocacy power, and ability to scale their organizations.

Program Development and Structure
Founded on strong long-standing staff and charter leader relationships, in 2015, the 99 Accelerator brought together a cohort of five leaders of high-quality, well-established charters that stretched across Central California. Positive responses to the pilot led to the creation of a second cohort in the Sacramento region in 2016. Networking, relationship building, and informational sessions were provided

in monthly meetings and group social activities. Cohort members maintained a high level of trust and communication that provided thought partnership, expertise, and strategy support for one another that continues to this day.

Outcomes
Eight of the nine 2015 and 2016 cohort members submitted petitions and opened new schools—the largest ever increase in Central Valley autonomous charter school growth. Many of those schools continue to open new schools that outperform traditional public school counterparts and have significantly increased the number of leaders of color in Central Valley charter public schools. Based on the success of the relationship-centered approach and with CCSA's support, the model spun out of CCSA in 2018 to become its own organization, 360 Accelerator, which facilitates an expanded 99 Accelerator as well as additional cohorts in the Sacramento and Los Angeles regions, with school leaders expressing a desire to create similar regionally-based communities of practice across the state.

San Diego Girard Cohort (2017-2020)

Purpose
The San Diego Girard Cohort was created in response to the community-led, regional need for leaders of small, high-quality charter schools to network, share best practices, and support each other as they moved toward replication or significant expansion.

Theory of Action
The theory of action proposed that if CCSA can identify the needs of charter leaders and create a group that would benefit from participating schools' varying experiences, backgrounds, and expertise, then leaders could create opportunities for growth by influencing the landscape and supporting each other.

Program Development and Structure
Developed with the support of the Girard Foundation, the first year of the cohort work included interviewing over 30 charter leaders throughout San Diego County. Based on these interviews and charter leader interest, five charter leaders were invited to join the cohort. The second year of the cohort included monthly, day-long meetings that addressed priority topics identified by the charter leaders in interviews and surveys. The third year of the cohort incorporated one-to-one support for the school leaders from an educational strategic planning consultant, as well as formal and informal networking.

Outcomes
This cohort resulted in the independent post-cohort establishment of a San Diego Small Charter Schools workgroup that has since been meeting weekly to discuss issues, share ideas and resources, and collaborate with one another to improve quality and support charter school growth in the region. Two of the schools in the cohort added significant seats to their existing programs, although none of the schools submitted replication petitions. Environmental factors that impacted potential growth included changes in leadership and lack of adequate new facilities.

Participant Experiences
Participants shared the benefits of receiving concrete forms of support, information and ideas, collaborative learning opportunities, and opportunities to share goals and to learn about others' goals:

"Having time to collaborate with other leaders and share strategic plans. [It was] also beneficial to have one-on-one time to help focus us on our planning. I think we have a good start now. And it was really nice to have [the meetings] in a school and to see kids."

"Not only did we have time to work on specific items, but we were also able to have others to consult with and provide feedback along the way. Collaborating with other school leaders and CCSA experts helped provide perspectives that supported our work."

Diversity in Leadership (DIL) Cohort (2018-2019)

Purpose
CCSA established the Diversity in Leadership (DIL) Accelerator in order to support and develop leaders of color in Southern California. The program was created with three goals: (1) to foster a community of practice, (2) to develop the capacity of participants to found high quality schools, and (3) to refine the cohort's leadership skills through leadership development rooted in the principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI).

Theory of Action
The theory of action for this cohort was that if DIL supported African-American and Latino/a leaders with targeted leadership development, school growth, funding and advocacy opportunities, it would transform charter leadership to become more reflective of the communities they serve.

Program Development and Structure
The DIL Accelerator consisted of twelve different modules exploring topics in three main categories: an exploration of DEI, school communities, and school design. Participants met for day-long, in person meetings for the duration of the year-long program. Cohort members were also expected to complete additional assignments outside of scheduled meetings. Recognizing the importance of identity in authentic leadership, the program was designed to be first a space for leaders of color to reflect on the importance of identity in authentic leadership, and second to give them the skills necessary to found and lead schools also deeply rooted in the values of DEI.

Outcomes
While the individual elements of the program were highly rated by participants, the DIL cohort has not resulted in new schools as of 2021. Evaluations and staff observations suggest that the wide range of experiences, capacity, and priorities of the selected participants would have required either longer program timelines, or more specific supports on growth to fulfill this secondary program goal. Based on the value that cohort members expressed and the unmet need for programs supporting leaders of color, this program evolved into a new organization, Diversity in Leadership Institute, which has its own "Aspiring Principals of Color Fellowship" for Black and Latino educators in Los Angeles and the Bay Area.

Participant Experiences
DIL participants highlighted the benefits of collaborative learning opportunities, concrete form of support, increased sense of belonging and decreased feelings of isolation, opportunities to share goals and learning from others' goals, a community of concern, and gaining information and ideas:

"I'm so much more knowledgeable about how the process of founding a school works, why charters exist, and what role they play in providing equity. If I'm going to advocate on behalf of my students and community, I know where to go and exactly where to point those efforts."

"For me, walking away with a supportive group of people who have the same passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion was absolutely invaluable. Sometimes you feel you're in a silo and it's not helpful. The sharing of ideas and the people in the cohort sharing advice was great."

New Schools Growth Program (NSGP) (2020-Present)

Purpose
The purpose of NSGP is to impact high-quality charter school growth by leveraging CCSA's role as convener and connector to provide charter school developer teams with opportunities to interact with and learn from CCSA staff, experts in the charter school field, and each other.

Theory of Action
If new charter school developer teams participate in group-based supports, then they are more likely to design, plan, and open high-quality schools and impact growth than if the teams were solely provided with individual supports.

Program Development and Structure
The first NSGP cohort included 11 new school leaders representing charter school development teams from across the state. Leaders were chosen based on their interest in starting a charter school and participation in CCSA-developed self-assessments. The second NSGP cohort launched in September 2021 with 7 school teams.

Participant Experiences
Feedback from our first-year participants reflected the advantages of a concrete form of support, sharing information and ideas, and support for self-discovery:

"CCSA is doing a terrific job. We love the New School Growth Program. Our charter school development has grown leaps and bounds since we've started this program."

"The foundation you built for us knowledge-wise has been a huge part of our success so far."

NSGP is a two-year, mostly online program that supports charter school developers through the foundation, petition writing, authorization, and start-up phases of the charter development process. This program gives charter developers the opportunity to engage with CCSA and each other through synchronous and asynchronous modules, office hours, a Developer Summit, access to CCSA's charter conference, one-to-one support (including a partial petition review), peer networking, and guidance from CCSA partners such as legal firms and back office providers. Content areas for NSGP included vision and mission creation, petition and budget development, governance, public messaging, and public hearing preparation, among others.

Outcomes
Out of the 11 school teams who participated in the first cohort, six submitted petitions, four pushed back their anticipated start date to 2023, and one dropped out of the cohort program due to capacity (specifically, lack of a founding team). This is quite typical of our observations of charter development pipelines from year to year. This will be our baseline to determine potential success and impact of the NSGP in future iterations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the learnings and experiences of implementing various models and styles of support for charter school developer teams, CCSA is offering the following recommendations to support school growth through a cohort model. These recommendations can be scaled up or down depending on the unique portfolio of schools and available resources.

1. Design your cohort to focus on the most critical skills and capacities and facilitate effective content sharing with and among participants.

- ❖ The programming should focus on the development elements that are most critical to the success of a school *and* are best suited for cohort exploration. For example, CCSA has focused on module topics that are universal application, complex, and foundational to a school's short- and long-term success, and are not easily accessible by a vendor or another provider.
- ❖ Resource cultivation and archives should be developed along the way, focusing on ease of use and ability for the participants to access materials across cohorts. CCSA developed a Member Portal that held both recordings of cohort trainings as well as resources and samples. While developed and curated for the cohorts, these resources were open to all members which allows for the dissemination of quality practices across the charter school community.
- ❖ The program design should be flexible and adapt to changing political and policy environments, as well as the needs of the cohorts. These adaptions could be within a cohort cycle or from cohort to cohort.

2. Structure cohort supports in a way that fosters networking among participants and professionals in the field.

- ❖ The cohort design should facilitate participants sharing knowledge and resources among themselves to increase the richness and impact of the program. This can include structured small group breakout sessions during cohort meetings, as well as informal exchange of participant contact information so that they could connect outside of scheduled cohort meetings to explore materials and share experiences.
- ❖ Find ways to connect cohort members to charter school partners, supporters, vendors, and community organizations that will be able to assist developer teams as they move forward in the authorization and start-up phases of their charter school development. This could include direct introductions to vendors in the field, and/or creating opportunities for professional networking at charter-specific conferences or webinars.
- ❖ Explore ways to continue to support cohort members or create support networks after the formal cohort work is completed (similar to the post-cohort, school leader-initiated work that developed after the San Diego Girard Cohort) in ways that are scalable and replicable. This could include mentorship from cohort members that have "graduated" from a cohort program.

3. Measure participant growth through accountability and evaluation.

- ❖ Define how participants will be chosen, what the necessary prerequisite skills/capacities are (if any), and how participant growth will be assessed over time. CCSA used intake surveys to measure participants' knowledge of the charter school development process and to track key preparation indicators. The data from these surveys determined what the team had accomplished to date and what knowledge gaps were missing to plan relevant cohort programming. The topic-specific areas on the survey were then measured at the mid-point of the program and at the end of the program to quantify any growth in participants' knowledge.
- ❖ The cohort should be built in a way that allows for developer teams to support each other and hold each other accountable. CCSA observed this participant support/accountability occurring

both organically and within the programming. Part of this success may be attributed to small cohort sizes.

❖ Request deliverables in between modules in order to measure participant progress and ensure accountability to themselves and each other. These deliverables should be a part of their necessary work in starting a charter school.

❖ After cohort members submit their charter petitions and go through the authorization process, identify common themes of teams that were successful, as well as a post-mortem of schools that were not able to submit or open on their anticipated start date.

❖ Use program evaluation and participant self-evaluation to plan for future iterations of cohort model design. For example, after each San Diego Girard Cohort meeting and NSGP module, surveys were given to determine what was most beneficial and where we could improve our program content and structure.

In summary, through CCSA's various iterations and implementations of growth supports, cohorts have been one of the most effective ways to provide concrete charter development technical supports in a collaborative learning environment that decreases leaders' feelings of isolation and increases a sense of belonging. Cohorts also have the potential to increase the quality and quantity of new charter schools given the wide range of formal and informal supports that could result from this type of learning environment.