

LEAD for Charters – A Cargill Charter Schools Initiative

Year 2 interim report summary

In 2004, the Cargill Foundation hired the LarsonAllen and Nonprofits Assistance Fund to design and manage a program to build business management capacity among Minneapolis area Charter Schools. This resulted in a three year initiative called LEAD for Charters. Eight charter schools were selected to participate in the program based on their readiness to increase management capacity, interest in learning new ways of operating, and willingness to work with other schools.

The seven schools remaining served 1,995 students in the 2006-2007 school year. LEAD schools serve about one in seven grade school charter students and their student populations are disproportionately low income and students of color when compared to statewide numbers for charter schools and all Minnesota public schools. See Figure 1 for a descriptive comparison of the LEAD charter schools and other statewide charter and public schools.

LEAD students compared with statewide charters and all Minnesota public schools, as of the 2006-2007 school year

	Grades	Total students	Students of color	Free or reduced lunch
LEAD charters	K-6/8*	1,995	93%	76%
Statewide charters	K-6	13,253	57%	58%
Statewide overall	K-6	418,628	24%	34%

**Note: Two of the seven LEAD schools serve students through 8th grade while five serve students through 6th grade.*

LEAD success

Overall, evaluation activities through the second year of the LEAD project show successful implementation of the project. Some key factors that indicate the strength of LEAD for Charters implementation are:

- **Strong retention.** Seven of the eight schools originally selected for the project continue to be actively involved as the project moves through its third year of implementation. Furthermore, the discontinued involvement by the remaining school was a result of management changes at that school and not due to dissatisfaction with the program.
- **Active participation.** The schools still involved maintain a high level of participation. All of the schools have had representatives at each of the peer learning sessions (group technical assistance) and all have contracted work with the Resource Team to provide their school with one-on-one technical assistance to address specific needs.
- **High satisfaction.** The remaining schools indicate very high satisfaction with the LEAD project. Out of 26 ratings for the six Peer Learning Sessions, 21 ratings indicated the sessions were “very helpful” and the other five ratings indicated the sessions were “somewhat helpful.” Furthermore, 18 out of 19 possible ratings for individual technical assistance indicated they were “very satisfied” with the assistance provided.

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LEAD challenges

There have been a few challenges regarding the implementation of LEAD activities. These appear to have been addressed effectively and do not appear to threaten the success of the project. For the most part, these issues are inherently capacity issues within the schools. The challenges are as follows:

- **Staff time.** It is hard for many of the schools to find a balance between providing staff enough interaction with the project while not overwhelming them with extra work. However, the LEAD project has been very sensitive to this issue and has made good use of the schools' time.
- **Difficulty maintaining contact.** Schools have also had some difficulty staying in contact with or exchanging information with staff and leadership at the schools. Difficulty maintaining interactions with project management and Resource Team members also posed some difficulty but it was less of an issue than the interactions within the schools.
- **Leadership turnover.** Executive leadership turnover has inhibited the implementation of LEAD at one school in particular. However, which some help from the LEAD model, they have since stabilized leadership and this has improved the schools ability to implement LEAD.

LEAD outcomes

Along with successful program implementation and high satisfaction among the participants, there have also been a number of examples of successful capacity building. These early outcomes represent changes in the way LEAD schools are operating as organizations. A few examples of these changes are as follows:

- **Board work plans.** Four of the LEAD schools have implemented clear and focused work plans for their board of directors. These work plans include methods for working as a cohesive board, descriptions for the board's role in the school,

and a model for maintaining a policy-oriented board of directors.

- **Human resources.** Three LEAD schools have developed clear and accurate job descriptions for their staff. One of these schools has developed and implemented a structured hiring and talent recruitment process that they previously did not have.
- **Transportation.** Two LEAD schools (along with a third non-LEAD school) have starting a busing collaborative in response to cuts in services provided by the Minneapolis Public Schools. Successful implementation of the collaborative will allow the schools greater flexibility with class times, financial savings, and the ability to better serve their students.
- **Facilities.** Two schools officially had facilities on their work plan. One of these schools is currently expanding their existing facilities. The other school, through the help of LEAD processes, has decided it is more strategically advantageous to hold off on any major facilities initiative. Furthermore, another LEAD school is going ahead with a new facilities plan which was influenced in part through their LEAD work with leadership and board development.

LEAD impacts

Through these (and other) increased capacities some real and potential impacts have been identified. These outcomes are described on three levels; organization, students, and community.

- **Organization.** On the organizational level, LEAD participants recognized impact on leadership and staff at the schools. This includes more competent board and executive leadership that better know their roles in relationship to each other. The organization is also strengthened through changes in staff management. This is achieved through more efficient hiring and recruitment processes as well as better communication and role identification through written job descriptions and organization charts.

- **Students.** Impact on students was identified in a number of ways including a more organized learning environment through leadership, improved educational space through new or expanded facilities, increased staff competencies through more effective hiring and development, and increased numbers of students as a result of more effective recruitment and marketing.
- **Community.** Schools identified a number of ways LEAD work may affect the larger community. One is through a new education model that may be implemented in the region partly because of leadership work done through LEAD. Another is an increased focus on providing services to the community through the schools. Also, LEAD schools may affect how other charter schools operate through the transmission of lessons learned to a broader network of schools.

LEAD considerations

As the LEAD for Charters initiative moves through its third and final year a few points should be considered. These include some strengths of the LEAD model, an area of consideration that may need to be addressed, and some issues that may be relevant in the third year of LEAD implementation.

Three particular strengths of the LEAD model are its flexibility in the implementation of activities which allows high levels of participation, the integrated nature of the technical assistance which allows general and focused attention on schools' needs, and the high quality of the consultants that make up the Resource Team which brings valuable knowledge to the process.

One particular area of LEAD that may need to be addressed is the ability of the program to be operationally flexible (beyond scheduling activities) while also maintaining program fidelity. This is particularly important in determining activities that are intended to build capacity and levels of assistance that are appropriate. Although schools were selected, in part, on their leadership readiness to increase business capacity, it is still not possible to avoid having situations arise where a school may need help with emerging operational issues that can inhibit capacity building. In these situations LEAD needs to continue to be aware of these issues, help schools find opportunities to overcome these issues, and potentially intervene when assistance is needed.

Moving through the third and final grant year of the LEAD project highlights the importance of ensuring outcomes and progress made through LEAD work are maintained and can be built on. The transition of the project should be considered in terms of funding and expansion. Funding includes making sure that current schools are aware of decisions made as well as taking opportunity to support successful outcomes through targeted transition funding. If the LEAD model proves to be successfully increasing the capacity of charter schools to deliver high quality education then it may be desirable to consider the expansion to more schools. Models for this expansion are numerous and might or might not include the wide scale continuation of current schools.

In conclusion, it appears that given the opportunity and tools through the LEAD for Charters Initiative, participating schools are successfully improving their management capacity and identifying ways they expect the project will empower them to affect student achievement.

For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *LEAD for Charters – A Cargill Charter Schools Initiative*. For more information about this report, contact Brian Pittman at Wilder Research, 651-280-2691.

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