



OPPORTUNITY AMERICA

PEER-TO-PEER ROUNDTABLE CTE CHARTER SCHOOLS

In June 2017, Opportunity America convened a roundtable discussion with some two dozen educators from charter schools that focus on career and technical education. Participants came from across the U.S.: school networks and small stand-alone schools from Rhode Island to California. The goal of the half-day gathering: to share best practices, discuss common challenges, float ideas about public policy and explore the value of continuing the conversation – forming a peer-to-peer learning community for CTE charter educators. Opportunity America president Tamar Jacoby moderated the conversation.

WHY CTE CHARTERS

“We’ve brought you all together because we feel you’re on the cutting edge – pioneers in an important new movement we believe is poised to take off across the U.S. The charter school movement has traditionally focused on college access – getting students from families that often had no exposure to higher education into and through four-year colleges. This was and remains a critical mission. But it has meant that many charter educators are coming late to the exciting innovations transforming career and technical education. You’re the exceptions – charter educators who understand the appeal of the new CTE. And we’ve brought you together to explore the promise of combining the two approaches – using the advantages of charter schools to boost the power of CTE.”

Tamar Jacoby, opening remarks



August 11, 2017

INTRODUCTIONS

Panelists introduced themselves and briefly described their schools. Each was asked to name their institution's greatest strength and most daunting challenge, focusing on strengths and challenges unique to CTE charters.

Strengths

A common thread ran through the presentations: educators felt their CTE-focused charter schools were in a position to be more flexible, upending traditional curricular requirements and teaching norms.

"Our biggest strength as a CTE charter is our flexibility – we're not bound by the same rules as an ordinary district school or an ordinary CTE school." *

"Our biggest advantage is our ability to integrate academic subjects and hands-on CTE curriculum – essential at any CTE school but often easier for us."

"We have more flexibility for our teachers to plan alongside industry experts."

"Our biggest innovation was changing our academic calendar. Our students go to class for six weeks, then they have a week off – a week for an internship or some other work-based learning experience."

"We're able to focus on competencies that translate into the workplace – not, like most schools, on traditional, time-based Carnegie units."

Challenges

A second common thread: educators felt that CTE charters, like charter schools generally, pay for their flexibility with heightened scrutiny and accountability – and that they're often held to inappropriate state standards.

"The state's funding and accountability systems aren't designed for schools like ours."

"State regulations make it difficult to hire teachers out of industry – but we can't function effectively without those instructors."

"Our greatest strength is that we're funded and led by employers. Our greatest weakness is that the local school system doesn't like that very much. It doesn't fit their model. They see it as a challenge to their rules. And that makes things hard for us."

"State charter regulations require that we admit students through a blind lottery, but not every student in the lottery wants to attend a CTE school."

"There are stigmas attached to both CTE and charters, so we have to fight both battles."

** With the exception of moderator Tamar Jacoby's comments, all quoted remarks are anonymous. Participants attended the roundtable on the condition that it was off the record – Opportunity America anticipated that this would permit a more relaxed and candid conversation.*

THREE TOP-OF-MIND ISSUES

Picking up on the themes surfaced in the introductions, moderator Tamar Jacoby led the group through three in-depth sessions – detailed discussions of the three broad challenges the educators said they find most pressing.

Flexibility and accountability

CTE charters tend to be less rule-bound than traditional CTE schools, which often struggle with a long list of burdensome state requirements – traditional school-day scheduling, teacher certification, required course sequencing and other mandates. This leaves CTE charters freer to experiment, exploring the most effective ways to teach students the skills they'll need in the workplace – but then educators bump up against other requirements that limit their flexibility.

“The unique flexibility of CTE charters allows us to work backward from a desired outcome. We can say, OK, this is the outcome we want for our students and then design a program with that outcome in mind. But this freedom can be illusory – because our students still have to pass the same exams as students from traditional district schools. How do I blow up the concept of seat time when I still have to prepare 95 percent of my students to pass a standardized state exit exam? It’s not an easy circle to square.”

“We don’t use Carnegie units. All our programs are competency-based. We’re 100 percent focused on skills we know are useful in the workplace – and students learn them at their own pace. The challenge is maintaining this focus and integrity in a world that runs on Carnegie units. When students transition out of our school, colleges and other postsecondary programs want to see Algebra 2 on their transcripts, not the more concrete workplace skills we call *STEM competencies*.”

Partnering with employers

What makes 21st-century CTE different from traditional vocational education: first and foremost, the involvement of employers – the only way to guarantee that students are learning skills in demand in the workplace. Schools recruit employer partners to help design curriculum, identify valued occupational credentials, donate equipment and, most important, provide opportunities for work-based learning. Roundtable participants agreed: the unique flexibility of charter schools positions them to engage local employers – but like most educators, many still found it difficult to build relationships across the divide.

“Our school wouldn’t exist without the Associated General Contractors. The AGC affiliate in our state wrote a check to help us get started and continues to support the school – helping develop and refine curriculum, assess students’ work and find jobs for our graduates. And it’s not just about charity or corporate social responsibility. We also meet a real need for them – we’re an important part of their talent pipeline.”

“Building relationships with employers is tough. Lots of companies – especially big firms – are willing to talk to us. But then when you make the ask, things often get more complicated. ‘This sounds great,’ one employer told me recently. ‘We’re totally on board. But is there any way you could make it simpler and easier for us?’ . . . Without strong employer relationships, it’s difficult to make good on the promises we make to our students.”

“We have a hard time at our school figuring out who should be the liaison reaching out to employers. Teachers don’t have time. They don’t know how. They don’t speak the same language as employers. We know it’s essential to build relationships, but it isn’t easy.”

“Our biggest challenge is finding employers to sponsor internships.”

“What’s hard – but critical – is finding a way to talk to employers about the value proposition.”

“In our system, we talk about employer engagement along a spectrum. The low end is retail-level engagement: one-off volunteer opportunities and corporate-social-responsibility events. The middle of the spectrum is work-based learning – employers who host our students for internships. The high end is system-level engagement, where we partner with local industries to design programs in careers with high employer demand.”

Integrating class time and technical training

Like all CTE schools, CTE charters struggle to integrate classroom learning and traditional academic subjects with the technical training and hands-on experience their students need to succeed in the workplace. Roundtable participants felt they were at an advantage: as charters, they are often freer than district schools to blur the lines between the two realms. But in this case too, many said their freedom was limited – their students still have to meet traditional state academic requirements.

“Our English teachers teach technical reading and writing, so primary source material includes business manuals, not just novels. It makes what the students learn in the classroom feel more relevant to them.”

“What we do is find a naturally occurring academic lesson in the CTE curriculum – the geometry you need for basic welding, for example – and then we have the CTE teacher and the traditional teacher plan the class together. The traditional teacher knows the subject matter; the teacher from industry understands practice. Put the two together, and students learn both the theory and how to apply it.”

“Integrating curriculum is difficult, mostly because the state hasn’t figured out how to assess students’ progress on a combined academic and CTE curriculum.”

“Let’s be careful what we wish for, folks. Do we really want to blow up the conventional academic yardsticks, or ask to be held to a different standard? I’m not sure we do. As charters, we’re already accused of creaming – and as CTE schools, it’s assumed that our students are academically inferior. I’m not sure we want to play into those stereotypes by asking to get our kids out of the tests.”

LOOKING AHEAD

The roundtable concluded with a session devoted to next steps. Were participants interested in continuing the conversation? Would they see value in a peer network or peer-to-peer learning community? And what kinds of help, if any, would they find useful in the future – convenings, research, policy development or some other type of assistance?

An email list. Roundtable participants were eager to stay in touch. They asked that Opportunity America circulate an attendee list with contact information and said they would welcome regular emails – news, updates and other material about other CTE charters and the CTE charter movement.

Shared resources. Among participants’ most frequent requests: information. Most educators don’t have time to stay abreast of scholarly research. Few attend academic conferences, most don’t participate in policy forums. But they want to stay informed about developments in the

CTE field and would welcome a forum, ideally online, where they and others could share resources.

Regular meetings. Participants expressed strong interest in additional convenings: an annual meeting at the National Charter Schools Conference and smaller, regional meetings throughout the year.

Site visits. Participants expressed interest in visiting each other's schools – the most effective way, they believe, to learn from each other. One suggestion for the coming year: a series of, say, three regional meetings, each at an exemplary CTE charter. Several educators around the table said their schools might be willing to host meetings.

Employer engagement. Like most CTE schools, CTE charters struggle to form relationships with employers – partners vital to the educators' success but often difficult to recruit and uncertain about how to partner with a high school or middle school. Roundtable participants would like help – toolkits, technical assistance, introductions to employers and employer associations in their regions and additional roundtable sessions where they can learn from other educators' experience with business and industry.

Professional development. Like all CTE schools, CTE charters have difficulty recruiting teachers: both traditional academic teachers willing to combine their curriculum with technical topics and industry experts interested in taking a break to try teaching. Roundtable participants want information about opportunities for professional development, and several said they would welcome an additional roundtable session devoted exclusively to teacher recruitment.

Funding opportunities. Among the areas where participants expressed the greatest need for assistance: fundraising. CTE is expensive, and in most states, public funding is inadequate. Roundtable attendees asked to be sent information about grant opportunities; they feel they could learn from each other's fundraising experience. They would welcome technical assistance and see this as an issue ripe for advocacy at both the state and federal levels.

A policy clearinghouse. Every state is different, but similar policy challenges arise everywhere: regulations governing exit test requirements, CTE teacher certification and industry-recognized credentials, among other matters. One frequently requested resource: an online catalogue of state policy – legislation and regulation – touching on issues that matter to CTE educators and charter schools.

Policy development. Roundtable participants were educators, not policy experts, but many were eager to have input on education policy. Experienced on-the-ground practitioners, they felt they could be helpful in shaping state regulations and suggested future convenings devoted to developing model legislation – a better approach, for example, to CTE teacher certification or how states decide which industry credentials count toward academic progress.

Advocacy. One of the items that came up most often in the final session of the roundtable: advocacy – a striking measure of just how burdensome many participants find state regulations. What they want from a national network: help building the capacity to make their case on a state-by-state basis – tools for local advocates working to advance better policy.

Opportunity America is a Washington-based nonprofit promoting economic mobility – work, skills, careers, ownership and entrepreneurship for poor and working Americans. The organization's principal activities are research, policy development, dissemination of policy ideas and working to build consensus around policy proposals.



CTE CHARTER ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

June 11, 2017

Shelly Arvizu, operations coordinator, Yuba County Career Prep Charter Academy, Marysville, CA

Nathan Barrymore, principal, Da Vinci Communications, El Segundo, CA

Elizabeth Bowman, adult education manager, Briya Public Charter School, Washington, DC

Janel Brown, director of curriculum & instruction, Sustainable Futures PCS, Washington, DC

Kathy Carlisle, CEO, THINC College & Career Academy, LaGrange, GA

Mario Cirillo, head of school, Academy for Career Exploration, Providence, RI

Dennis Curran, executive director, NEL-CPS Construction & Career Academy, Cranston, RI

Luke Driver, director of curriculum & CTE, Academy for Career Exploration, Providence, RI

Deborah Essel, asst superintendent of education, Springs Charter School, Temecula, CA

George Essel, lead CTE coordinator, Springs Charter School, Temecula, CA

Julie Meyer, executive director, The Next Step Public Charter School, Washington, DC

Ryan Monroe, chief academic officer, Carlos Rosario Public Charter School, Washington, DC

Jennifer Morrison, asst principal, Yuba County Career Prep Charter Academy, Marysville, CA

David Noah, principal, Urban Assembly Charter School for Computer Science, Bronx, NY

Ian Rowe, CEO, Public Prep Network, Bronx, NY

Tori Stephens-Shauger, ED & principal, ACE Leadership High School, Albuquerque, NM

Cate Swinburn, vice president of programs, EducateNow!, New Orleans, LA

Rich Thompson, VP of business development, YouScience, Atlanta, GA

Michael Traficante, director of governmental affairs, New England Laborers, Cranston, RI

Natasha Warsaw, head of school, Sustainable Futures PCS, Washington, DC

OBSERVERS

Chris Grapes Garcia, director of strategic partnerships, KIPP Through College

Elena Sanina, senior manager, Impact Team, Charter School Growth Fund

MODERATOR

Tamar Jacoby, president, Opportunity America, Washington, DC



CTE CHARTER SCHOOL ROUNDTABLE

AGENDA

June 11, 2017

- 2:00 p.m. WELCOME & FRAMING – WHY WE’RE HERE
- 2:05 p.m. **YOUR SCHOOL**
- Participating educators introduce themselves and describe their schools. What is your school’s greatest strength and most daunting challenge?
- 3:00 p.m. **THE PROMISE OF CTE CHARTERS**
- CTE charters span two worlds, combining the strengths of the charter movement with the power of career and technical education – not old-fashioned voc ed, but the new, reimagined CTE taking off in school districts across the country. What’s unique about CTE charters? What are their distinctive strengths? What do they add to the charter movement? What will they bring to the CTE revolution?
- 3:30 p.m. **YOUR TOP CHALLENGES**
- What are the top challenges facing CTE charters – and how do you go about addressing them at your school? Topics to be explored in this session: integrating CTE and academic instruction, employer engagement, CTE teacher certification.
- 4:10 p.m. **POLICY**
- How can policy help? Does state education policy support you as a CTE charter? Does it help you address your challenges, or add to them? This session will examine one or two policy areas, comparing across the states represented in the room. The goal of the session: to identify promising approaches and areas for future policy development.
- 4:40 p.m. **NEXT STEPS**
- Are participants interested in continuing the conversation? Would they see value in a peer-to-peer learning community? What kinds of help, if any, would they find useful in the future – convenings, research, policy development or some other type of assistance?
- 5:00 p.m. ROUNDTABLE ADJOURNS