

Transcript for audio blog:

Hiring District Leaders From the Charter Sector: A Conversation with Superintendents Tom Boasberg and Duncan Klussmann

Sarah Yatsko at the Center on Reinventing Public Education talks with Denver Public Schools (DPS) Superintendent Tom Boasberg and retiring Spring Branch Independent School District (SBISD) Superintendent Duncan Klussmann. Both superintendents chose to hire former charter leaders to high-level district positions. These positions spanned the traditional boundaries between district and charter schools, enhancing opportunities for district-charter collaboration.

Yatsko: For the last three years, a team of researchers from CRPE has been tracking the progress of district-charter collaboration in 21 cities, where district leaders have pledged to work together on shared school improvement goals across the two sectors. One phenomenon we noticed is how districts are hiring high-level positions directly out of the charter sector.

We took a closer look at the issue and wrote a paper on this topic. Two districts that are heavily featured in the paper are Denver Public Schools and Spring Branch Independent School District. On the line with me is Superintendent Tom Boasberg from DPS, and recently retired Superintendent Duncan Klussmann from SBISD.

Thank you both for joining me and sharing some of your motivations for hiring and experiences with these charter leaders.

Yatsko: Duncan, can you talk about why you thought Elliott Witney [SBISD Executive Director of Strategic Leadership & Innovation]—who you hired out of KIPP—was the right fit for your district and whether or not his background in the charter sector had any impact on your decision to bring him aboard.

Klussmann: Part of the influence occurred through our compact city work when we went to an initial meeting in Chicago. I looked around the landscape and saw how different districts were organizing talent in their central office and how we could learn from that. At the same time, there were some transitions going on within KIPP Houston. Mike Feinberg, one of the founders, announced he was stepping down as superintendent of KIPP Houston. An individual who had followed Mike in running KIPP Academy Middle School announced he would be stepping down and seeking other opportunities.

We had been in several meetings with Elliott on different initiatives over the years and were really impressed with him. Members of our board were also extremely impressed with him. I felt like it allowed, in an organization that was fairly traditional with some open-minded folks, to bring in some different thought processes and ways to approach solving issues and that is why I sought out Elliott to provide that within our organization.

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Yatsko: Tom, you made a similar decision to hire Alyssa Whitehead-Bust [DPS Chief Academic & Innovation Officer] out of the charter sector in Denver. Did you have similar motivations as Superintendent Klussmann?

Boasberg: As we looked at our organization, the work that we are doing is to close the achievement gap, deliver better education for our kids, [and] is hard and important work. Talent is critical. Whether it is the school level or district level, we are going to work hard to find the most talented people possible. Many of those are from the traditional K-12 sector, some are from the charter sector, some are from the private sector. We want our very thoughtful, talented, strategic, collaborative values-driven leaders. We also think it is critical to have a real diversity of viewpoints, backgrounds, and experiences. When you are dealing with very complex problems there is no easy answer. We have to think through very complex situations and the greater diversity of talent you have on your team, the better able you will be to tackle these challenges. We have deliberately sought a diversity of viewpoints and have worked in a collaborative fashion with our charter sectors. We are a team of public schools—both district run and charters—here to serve the kids of Denver, and instead of throwing missiles at each other over a wall we are more inclined to sit together at a common table and say how do we, together, provide better public education for the kids of this city.

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Yatsko: There are many smart superintendents across the country who would agree with everything you've said, but may come back with the politics in their city that make the hiring of somebody out of the charter sector a difficult proposition. In both of your cities there are strong relationships across the sector, however, in the not-too-distant past that wasn't the case.

What might you say to superintendents who are sympathetic to the argument of diversity of talent that is needed in the district but who are reluctant given politics. Did you have any negative experiences bringing these people into the district given the political environment?

Klussmann: I really didn't have external negative influences. Our board was comfortable with Elliott. [But] when you bring in someone who is not been in a traditional setting, there is work you have to do internally to make sure that individual is set up for success. I had to pay attention to that. I believe it is our responsibility as leaders when we bring someone from another sector into a traditional school system to make sure we do it in a way that they can be successful. I have had to address that at times. I believe that in all endeavors once a person is on the ground and has proved themselves, then all those speculations from before they started their work tend to go away. If you are hiring quality talent, once they get on the ground and start to do their work, a lot of the criticisms that maybe would be there before go away.

Boasberg: I would agree with that. Yeah, there were concerns and conflicts and suspicions. Some of that reflects the nature of the political environment we are in, which is this hyper-politicized environment that sets up these conflicts, which I think are often

false conflicts between the district-run and charter sectors. As Duncan said, it is up to leaders to find an individual who is broad-minded and collaborative and works well with other people and setting that person up for success by showing you care deeply about that person's ideas and not their background. But also, it comes in a political context that we as superintendents have a responsibility to set up what the climate is in our community around the relationship between district-run schools and charter schools. The more collaboration there is between principals and at the leadership level (for example we have a collaborative council of charter leaders and district leaders who meet on a regular basis to hash out issues), the more you set up a culture of: we are all public schools and we all are involved the same mission, as opposed to: we are enemies fighting this grand political war. I think that political context has a direct impact in the ability of someone to come from the charter sector to go to the district sector and put their talent and their ideas to work in a way that will benefit everyone.

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Yatsko: Do you see that the hiring of these two individuals was a way, intentionally or unintentionally, a way to reinforce the message that we are all public schools?

Boasberg: It was not the intention. We have hired dozens of people from the charter sector and vice versa. But we have come at this with a deliberate purpose to say, how are we going to help kids? Whether that is setting up systems of funding or building allocations or how co-principals are going to collaborate, how we are going to visit each other's schools, or whom we are going to hire. All of those are part and parcel of an intentional strategy to say we are going to focus on great schools as opposed to political arguments about governance structures.

Klussmann: The motivation within Spring Branch, and we've seen in Denver, is about creating as much success and great dynamics for kids to learn. And knowing that to do that, you have to bring in talent. As leaders we are not going to say that talent only comes from one arena, we are going to say that talent comes from many different sources. We are going to be willing as leaders to bring the best talent in no matter where that talent comes from. I do believe as a result of that and many other things, every action needs to send a message that a traditional school system like Spring Branch or Denver is going to partner with any entity, whether it is private or charter, we are going to partner with anyone we can that's going to help us move the needle for kids.

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Yatsko: As you look in the rearview mirror, and you think about the impact these individuals have had on the workings of the district, have there been any surprises that have helped you think differently about how to run schools?

Klussmann: I brought one person into a senior role, but our senior staff has brought in other charter individuals when they had vacancies and those individuals have bubbled up to the top talent in those areas, and we have four or five former charter leaders in our small organization. Elliott has great self-awareness, so he and I will talk often as he navigates that transition, providing that support has been critical.

Yatsko: Tom, I know you have hired people from all different sectors, so maybe the charter is only one variation of that theme, is there anything in particular about coming from a public charter organization that has brought a particular skill set?

Boasberg: Many of our charters operate with fewer constraints and many are very new and have to go through the act of creation, whereas many of our district schools have been around for some time. Those opportunities to create from scratch, to think outside the box are a wonderful set of skills and valuable set of experiences. For example, folks we've brought in from the charter sector—Alyssa being most prominent—have really given vitalizations to our district-run schools in terms of setting up design thinking labs and innovation labs and encouraging new district-run schools and programs. Our folks have loved that. Far from being a source of conflict, we have channeled this to be a great source of opportunity where we have folks who have had the opportunity to design and create and innovate bring those skills to our district-run folks and our district-run folks have seen that as so liberating and such a wonderful opportunity. Instead of being in an environment where you are told you can't do this, instead you say, start with a blank piece of paper, like I did, and create! That has been a remarkably healthy aspect of the partnership.

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Yatsko: I think much of what you have both shared here as well as what we have written in the paper should serve as inspiration to superintendents around the country who might be considering doing what you both have done. Any words of advice to your fellow superintendents as they contemplate this type of a hire?

Klussmann: there is great talent out there, but make sure leaders provide the appropriate supports so that individuals can come in and be successful in a traditional organization.

Boasberg: I would add that you as superintendent have to set the table. If you regard charters as your rivals, you're going to make the job really hard for someone from the charter sector to come to the district-run side. You don't want to tell them to abandon your friendships, contacts, and ties. That is an impossible and self-defeating proposition. If you as superintendent are regarding charters as the enemy, as opposed to people who share a common vision with you and will work jointly with you for the benefit of public education in your community. Your role and your vision and the culture that *you* set up will be very fundamental [whether] you are likely to get good people in the first place, but also their success and keeping their two legs on both boats. You want to have a degree of collaboration so that folks can continue to stand on both boats.

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