

**ED.L.D. CAPSTONE SUMMARY**

# **Breaking Down Silos in a School District: Findings from an Ed.L.D. Project in Montgomery County**

**Samantha Beth Cohen, Ed.L.D.'13**

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## CAPSTONE SUMMARY

# Breaking Down Silos in a School District: Findings from an Ed.L.D. Project in Montgomery County



### Samantha Beth Cohen, Ed.L.D.'13

**Site:** Montgomery County Public Schools

**Role:** Leading a project to create an effective system of interventions and supports to close achievement gaps and prepare all students for success

## THE COLLABORATION IMPERATIVE

The purpose of Ed.L.D. candidate Samantha Cohen's project was to help Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) create a comprehensive system of academic, social/emotional, learning, and family interventions so that student needs can be met swiftly and resources (time, people, funds) used efficiently. The specific goals in her project plan for the work were:

- ❖ Analyze the current state of interventions work within MCPS
- ❖ Define the interventions work stream and draft the accompanying frame for the work
- ❖ Create and implement short-term strategy successes within interventions
- ❖ Create and implement long-term strategy successes (good first instruction, etc.)
- ❖ Build coordinated interventions approach across departments (Offices of School Support and Improvement, Curriculum and Instructional Programs, Special Education and Student Services, Chief Operating Officer, and Dept. of Family and Community Partnerships)

For this new approach to interventions to be successful, Cohen had to address a deeper challenge: how to break down the organizational silos in the district — between schools, between units in central office, and between central office and schools — so that adults in different roles within the organization could (and would) work together more effectively on behalf of students.

No matter what type of organization you work in — large or small, public or private, hierarchical or flat, district or other — there are silos. Sometimes the barriers between various units or departments are minimal and do not hinder people in different roles from communicating or collaborating. In other cases, however, the barriers are significant, and as a result, staff find it very difficult (particularly in the absence of support and encouragement from the leadership) to work together. This is often seen in school districts, and the end results are highly detrimental. People pulling in different directions. Staff feeling isolated. Service gaps. Redundancies and inefficiencies. Lack of headway in solving problems. Misunderstanding. Frustration. And ultimately, lost opportunities to truly help students succeed.

In the third year of HGSE's Doctor in Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.) Program, candidates complete 10-month, field-based residencies. Each Ed.L.D. student completes a strategic project and produces a capstone that provides a descriptive, analytic, and reflective account of the resident's leadership of and contributions to the strategic project. This capstone summary offers quick insight to the resident's work and offers next steps, resources, and questions to consider for practitioners who might be leading similar work.

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There are many different types of ways to break down the silos within an organization. A key part of Cohen's strategy was to bring staff from different parts of the school district together to define shared goals and reach consensus about what needed to change.

She carried out her work in the following phases:

- 1) Planning Work** – reading a variety of materials and interviewing many (30-plus) different people in different roles throughout the district to develop a contextual understanding of the district's background, strategic plan, and previous work (and current priorities) regarding student interventions, then using this information to develop a project plan.
- 2) Interventions Audit** – compiling a database of more than 140 academic, social-emotional, behavioral, and family- and community-focused interventions underway in the district, capturing information on each (e.g., knowledge, skill, or behavior targeted, project lead); surveying the project leads to gather more information about efficacy, cost, etc.; developing a clear definition of what constitutes an intervention.
- 3) Landscape Analysis** – scanning research on various intervention models (especially Response to Interventions) and on change management and school change.
- 4) Problem and Strategy Definition** – synthesizing work from the above three areas to draft a definition of the problem, a framework, a phased implementation strategy, and a plan (with budget recommendations) for moving the work forward.
- 5) Constituency Building & Team Design Work** – including conversations with school and central office staff to vet the draft plan and identify staff members and teams who want to be involved in implementation. This led to more formal constituency building and team design work and the formation of a work group (including representatives from every major office in the district) that will be the main vehicle for implementation, and an advisory group (composed mainly of school-based staff) to provide advice and feedback on implementation.

Implementation will be phased in over the next three to four years. As they begin to implement the new interventions, schools will receive support, coaching, and accountability from a central office steering team.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

The following questions, grounded in Cohen's work, provide food for thought for leaders who want to break down silos and improve organizational coherence.

### **Question #1: If you are trying to build a cross-functional group or work team, who's "in"?**

For her work on creating an integrated system of instructional supports for students in Montgomery County Public Schools, Cohen sought to break down departmental silos and improve coordination and integration by forming two new entities: a work group and an advisory group. But deciding who should be included in each group was "politically" complicated. As she reflected in her capstone report:

*It was essential that the work group span the district's three main offices: School Support and Improvement; Operations; and Teaching, Learning & Programs. Each office had a lot to offer, and there were many strong opinions about the district's past successes and failures with interventions. To ensure we had strong representation from each office, I worked with the associate superintendents to identify staff members with interest in and commitment to interventions work. I explicitly asked that they recommend individuals who would want to be on this team and would volunteer their time.*

Cohen spent about a month gathering nominations and commitments for the work group. The members represented every major office in the district, from technology to curriculum to human resources to English Language Learners. The group's charge was to identify shared interests and to "create a new paradigm" for supporting struggling students in the district. As Cohen put it, "members' primary roles are to serve as vision setters, organizational leaders, liaisons, and designers."

In addition to this work group, an advisory group of school-based staff — including counselors, administrators, teachers, and social workers — was formed and tasked with providing pragmatic feedback on the work group's products and give guidance on how to implement a new approach to interventions. Cohen hoped that many of the schools represented within the advisory group would choose to participate in early pilot implementation.

Although both groups provided great value, Cohen came to see that having the work group composed almost entirely of central office staff was a mistake. "Doing so was a sign that I was too entrenched in the central office culture, which was divided and distant from principals and school-based staff," she noted. Principals were therefore added to the work group and brought valuable perspectives that had been missing before.

- ❖ Being thoughtful and strategic about who's involved in a cross-functional effort can make a world of difference down the road. The goal is a group that reflects diverse views and roles. Remember that differences in opinion may make the work more challenging but can strengthen the end results.

## **Question #2: Have there been previous efforts to break down silos in the organization? If so, what were the results? If they did not succeed, what were the underlying reasons?**

As Cohen talked with different leaders within Montgomery County Public Schools about the district's past interventions work, she found that these previous efforts had almost always been carried out by work groups situated within single departments or offices, and that their focus had been primarily on specific programs. Typically, a problem would be identified (for example, students having a particular difficulty in math or reading), a small group would come together to talk about it, and a list of high-priority reading, math, or behavioral interventions would be generated. But no one ever seemed to step back and consider how various interventions intersected, or to determine what gaps remained. "The bigger challenges were about teachers' expectations and about instructional and analytical skills," Cohen reflected, "but solutions to address these had never bridged multiple offices."

As a result of its narrow focus on programs, Cohen found that the district had "pieces" of a solution to support all learners, but not a holistic approach. Her priority was to synthesize the various components of a successful teaching and learning approach that were evident, not evident, and emerging within the district to lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive strategy.

- ❖ If there have been past efforts within your organization to tackle systemic problems, investigate what happened — what went well, what didn't, and why, then this will provide important insights into what needs to happen in order to achieve more significant and lasting change.

## **Question #3: Does everyone agree about the problem(s) that you are trying to solve? Are you sure?**

Midway through her project, Cohen realized that there was "a multitude of factions in the district with divergent opinions about the nature of the interventions problem and about possible solutions." Rather than directly invite debate on the nature of the problem at the outset, she and the work group had quickly narrowed their focus to mapping out solutions. As a result, however, the fact that people from different departments were defining the problem differently contributed to a lack of clarity. Curriculum staff was

focused primarily on human resources problems — e.g., some adults lacked the skills to meet all learners' needs. Special education staff, on the other hand, was focused mainly on implementation — e.g., work their office had done had not taken hold across the system.

Accordingly, the work group realized that it needed to revisit the problem. “We realized that it isn't just a student problem, with students not learning,” Cohen explained. “The problem is that our systems and mind-sets do not promote learning for all students.” Ultimately, the group re-focused itself on three problems: 1) student learning needs are not all being met, 2) adult learning needs are not all being met, and 3) the district functions as individual disconnected units, not an aligned system.

- ❖ Unclear or inconsistent problem definitions can derail collaborative efforts and result in fragmented or partial solutions. Taking time at the outset to clearly define the problem(s) you are trying to solve can save time in the long run.

#### **Question #4: To whom, how, and when are you talking about the vision and strategies for change?**

The communications strategy for Cohen's project was challenging, in part because her project had a broad focus: changing a variety of supports affecting a variety of different types of students. She found John Kotter's advice especially helpful: talk often about the vision and openly address concerns. “My practice was to talk about the vision non-stop, even while it was evolving,” she noted. “This included visiting schools to share the draft framework. It included meetings with staff members who were frustrated that years had gone by in MCPS without funding, data, or infrastructure for an interventions model.” A common refrain she kept hearing was that “nobody is responsible for this work.” To communicate the vision, she realized, the work group needed to address this. “We needed to communicate that this approach would be different because it would put the ownership in schools, with central services as the support.”

One communications strategy that Cohen found helpful was to create a basic visual depicting the key elements of successful interventions work — including preventive practices (such as assessment, data analysis, curricular planning and delivery, and problem solving) and the additional supports for students, staff, families, and communities that are needed to bolster those practices. As Cohen explained, “This framework became the basis of all of my interviews and discussions. It was the launching point to seek input on how to think more systemically and to seek feedback on what the district was already doing and not doing well, and it marked a pivotal shift from thinking simply about interventions, or reactive supports, to moving to an integrated approach where individual needs and supports were considered throughout the district.”

Despite these efforts, Cohen hit a roadblock when she presented the work group's interventions proposal to the school board; the plan was criticized for not being urgent enough or meeting the needs of all learners. The response made her realize that she and her colleagues had not done enough to prepare the board for the adaptive shift being proposed. “We should have been communicating more directly with the Board throughout the planning process,” she noted.

- ❖ Communicate early, often, and widely – and listen well.

#### **Question #5: When tackling big systemic problems, are you also creating some quick wins to provide early momentum for change?**

The school board's questioning of the initial implementation plans made Cohen realize that her focus on systems analysis and “seeing the long view” had at times prevented her from figuring out how to create some “small wins” that would build short-term momentum toward the larger goals of her project. “I am drawn to thinking about the future,” she reflected. “So although we have done a lot to tackle the big, messy

issues, we did not do enough tactical work, and that poised us to be critiqued by some who wanted to see more evidence that changes were happening.”

She therefore cautioned against “seeing only the forest and missing the trees.” Although significant results and big gains for students are the long-term goal of many district change efforts, this does not mean that small wins for adults or kids are unimportant. Drawing on John Kotter’s seminal work on change management, Cohen realized the importance of providing real signals to the organization along the way that progress is being made.

- ❖ Particularly when the end goals of your change effort are ambitious and long-term, be sure to demonstrate incremental successes and create momentum for change by building in opportunities for short-term “wins.”

## USEFUL RESOURCES

- ❖ Heifetz, R. & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership On The Line*. Cambridge: MA. Harvard Business School Publishing.
- ❖ Kotter’s 8-Step Change Model: Implementing Change Powerfully and Successfully. Mind Tools.
- ❖ Payzant, T. (2011). *Urban School Leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- ❖ Tushman, M. L. & O’Reilly, C. A. (2004). The ambidextrous organization. *Harvard Business Review*, April 2004.
- ❖ Williams, D. (2005). *Real Leadership: Helping People and Organizations Face their Toughest Challenges*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

## Communications Checklist for Cross-Functional Groups

- ☑ Remember that success is not contingent on any one individual or team; it depends on the organization’s reaction and investment.
- ☑ Share ideas and drafts transparently, frequently, and widely. This provides opportunities to continually augment the vision and to hear and address concerns.
- ☑ When you are using a work group or team to carry out the work, establish agreement that all team members are responsible for communication and building buy-in.
- ☑ At the start of each team or group meeting, solicit from the group the input they have been hearing. At the end of each meeting, ask team members to share the content of the meeting discussions with their own teams and colleagues and to bring their input back, allowing us to communicate our evolving vision and also hear and consider critiques and praise.
- ☑ Orchestrate multiple opportunities to communicate the vision and work to the superintendent and cabinet, executive leadership team, and board to share the evolving thinking and solicit feedback. This lets the vision to sink in and gives critics time to engage, share their feedback, and (ideally) get on board with the changes.
- ☑ Be sure to directly engage with those who express dissent, rather than backing away from them and assuming they would not engage. This allows their criticism to go unchecked and leaves you without a full understanding of their perspectives and what changes they may fear. Direct discussions with critics are opportunities for learning.