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Partnership with charter school reaps rewards for Central Falls school

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The superintendent of Central Falls schools, Frances Gallo, is nothing if not a fierce crusader for kids. So while it's highly unusual, it's not bizarre that she would broker a partnership between one of her own district schools, Captain G. Harold Hunt, and a terrific charter school that happens to be in her neighborhood. She says, "I specifically asked for the Learning Community's help because they've been so successful with a student body that mirrors ours. They're high-performing. We want to be high-performing. So we went and observed their work. We saw their kids being successful. We could learn from them." Far more common are the district superintendents who complain to anyone who will listen that charters "drain resources from public schools."

For the record, charters are public schools. And far more common are district employees who wax self-righteous about how charters failed to be the hotbeds of innovation they were first cracked up to be, but who refuse to go take a look.

If Gallo is unique, the Learning Community Charter School is equally rare. Its directors Sarah Friedman and Meg O'Leary designed it to be a living laboratory for examining teaching. Every school day the staff both teaches children and measures the quality of their own work. Their students are urban and poor, which is to say, challenged.

Principal of Captain Hunt, Edda Carmadello, says, "The Learning Community has had real success with Central Falls kids, with data to prove it, scores to prove it. At first the teachers here resisted the unknown, but once they understood what it was about,

they really embraced it. We all opened our hearts to a collaboration that is working towards what's best for kids."

Hunt is an early childhood center, so the project focused on the kindergartners.

Last fall, Christine Wiltshire, the charter's instructional coach, began working intensely with Heather Cinq-Mars, Hunt's reading specialist. Together they sat with the teachers as Wiltshire guided them through the process of creating four- to six-week lesson plans designed to build very specific skills for "smart readers."

Cinq-Mars says of Wiltshire, "Christine makes a conscious effort to know what the teachers' needs are. So much of what we're doing now, the teachers have done before, but now it's organized in a very clear way. Each concept is carefully focused."

Perhaps Wiltshire's most powerful impact has been to help teachers collect data about their kids' learning, and then to use it to plan instruction and identify struggling kids. Cinq-Mars, says, "The Learning Community teaches us to assess regularly so we know exactly where the students are and can help them grow." No more relying on intuition. Data is better. Data is quick to identify children who need to shore up a weak skill that will prevent them from progressing with their peers. Data tells teachers exactly what each child needs to learn next. For example, Wiltshire taught the teachers to give a child a book and quietly record exactly how the child does. The words a child gets right helps the teacher

build on strengths. But it's useless to mark an effort "wrong." Better to record exactly how a mistake came about. A child might look at the book's picture and the words, "The girl drinks," and read, "The girl drinks a soda while sitting on the park bench with her mother." The Learning Community would say, "Smart readers see one word, touch one word and say one word." Kids who don't have such a concept will need a "tutorial group."

Last fall Cinq-Mars spent three days over at the Learning Community shadowing their reading specialist to learn about "tutorials." These are short-term, remedial groups that ramp up mildly-struggling students with a concept or skill. When more serious learning problems arise, teachers know to intervene with more intense help.

Wiltshire says, "Tutorial is never instead-of, it's in addition-to. Tutorial coaches them up to their peers." These groups provide an academic safety net for children who start to stumble, for whatever reason. Help is quick and specific. No struggling child is left behind in some remedial purgatory, nor allowed just to flounder along side his peers.

At the beginning of the school year last fall, Wiltshire helped Hunt's teachers assess the kids to find out what letters, upper and lowercase, they recognized. No child knew more than 13 out of the total 52. Some knew no letters at all.

But with a few months of good instruction, many children learned their alphabet quickly and were ready, by January, to start building the sounds and

letters into words and simple sentences. The teachers know, to the letter, what each child understands, and by now are assessing more sophisticated skills, like recognizing simple, early-reading words. With the data in hand, the teachers are sure that literally all the students are steadily learning.

Gallo says, "Edda [the principal] has been the ideal progress monitor for us. She's always taking the data and saying, "Look!! It's working."

And so it is. All because an unusual district superintendent reached out to a good school that most districts would see as a threat to do what's best for kids.

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**THE LEARNING
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a public charter school

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