

NEWSMAKERS

## Program proof charter, public schools can work together

**"So many children live in districts that are failing."**



**WILLING PARTNER:** The Learning Community's Christine Alves is working with public-school teachers to improve reading skills. PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

By Marc Mainville  
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**PBN:** The partnership created between The Learning Community and Central Falls public schools has really raised the profile of your nonprofit school. How does this partnership work?

**ALVES:** The partnership has four main components and I think part of the reason why it works so well is that it is comprehensive. It's not just one major slice of work we are doing but four pieces. We have grade-specific professional development, not just whole-school workshops that other professional-development organizations might put out. Our trainings are grade-level specific. So all the first-grade teachers go to a first-grade teacher workshop that is very targeted and actually ends up being more effective.

The second part is we also go deeper than those workshops. We do coaching, so we are helping teachers in Central Falls implement the things we're training in the

workshops. We go into the classrooms and the teacher gets to choose whether they want the consulting teacher to run a lesson for the students, or simply watch as they give the lesson.

The third part is we've implemented quarterly assessments in Central Falls. ... We are making sure we have data that's going to give us information about what should be the next steps in our initiative.

The fourth part is the safety net. It's a way to capture the students who are falling further below and get them up to speed.

**PBN:** What methods do you use to provide that safety net?

**ALVES:** We use the data to identify the kids who are lagging behind. The reading specialists, who we've also trained in this model of teaching, will work with those kids in small groups and give them an extra dose of reading instruction that is very specifically targeted to their needs. That helps them grow a little bit faster, so the hope is they will catch up rather than continuing to grow as readers at that slower pace, so we have all kids reading where they should be reading.

**PBN:** Why is reading proficiency such a hard thing to achieve?

**ALVES:** Reading is so complicated and it is a very hard thing to teach and it does take highly skilled professionals to teach someone how to read. But, in addition to what we are seeing in regular public schools, we have the extra challenges that urban public schools face. We have a lot of students for whom English is not their first language, who come to school maybe not knowing English, or very, very limited English.

**PBN:** It seems the model you are bringing to teaching focuses a lot of attention on teacher-to-teacher learning. Why is that so valuable?

ALVES: We are a rare example of teacher-to-teacher professional development in the country right now. I think what makes that work so well is the teachers are sharing what they know to be working in their classrooms with the teachers in the communities they consult with. It's not like a consultant, who knows about reading, coming in and talking about reading in general at the elementary level. The consulting teachers specifically share lessons that they did yesterday, and lessons that they are doing tomorrow.

PBN: A lot of times we see friction between charter schools and public schools, but this partnership hasn't shown signs of that. Why has this partnership worked?

ALVES: This partnership has worked because both sides were willing, and desired to, work together. We at the charter school listen to the teachers from the traditional public schools. We listened to some of the challenges that they were facing and worked together to troubleshoot some possible solutions and next steps. That showed how much we respected them because we do; as teachers, how can you not respect another teacher.

It also showed them that we were really in it with them. That's one of the main reasons why we've been successful, because of the mutual respect.

PBN: Do you think this model has an opportunity to grow to other communities?

ALVES: Absolutely, right now we are seeking communities that would like to work with us to improve their performance.

PBN: You seem very passionate about creating opportunities for children, especially if they come from a disadvantaged community.

ALVES: I guess everyone who works with children loves them, but also deeply respects them. I respect them so much in the sense that I believe they deserve an excellent education no matter where they live.

Unfortunately, we have so many children that live in urban districts that are failing and they have been in need of serious improvement for some time, and that tells me that we have to figure out a way to help provide them with an excellent education because that's what they deserve.

That brings me to my equal respect for teachers in public schools, because I believe we can strengthen the effectiveness of our public schools by investing in teachers who are there every day, working really hard in their classrooms. Why don't we give them some of the tools and resources we've tried out and have shown to work in a similar demographic, because if it works at our school, it's going to work in their school as well.

### **Christine Alves**

Position: Director of external professional development at The Learning Community, a charter school in Central Falls

Background: In her current role, Alves leads several initiatives at The Learning Community, including a nationally recognized partnership with the Central Falls public schools. She came to The Learning Community as a first-grade teacher in 2006 and as an instructional coach. Prior to that, she spent five years as a first-grade teacher and a member of the Board of Trustees at the Paul Cuffee School in Providence. She has also taught at the Dana Hall School and the Tenacre Country Day School in Massachusetts.

Education: Master's of arts in teaching, Brown University, 2001; bachelor's in biology, Brown University, 1998

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