

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE PROJECT L.I.F.T. STORY

*Early Lessons from a
Public-Private Education Turnaround Initiative*

Juli Kim and Shonaka Ellison | **Public Impact**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1971, a federal court ordered Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) to use busing to integrate its racially divided schools. Within a few years, the district became a national model of successful desegregation, with West Charlotte High School the jewel in the Queen City's crown. With the dismantling of busing in the 1990s, however, West Charlotte High School again became a majority minority school. By the 2009–10 school year, West Charlotte's graduation rate was 51 percent, the lowest of all CMS high schools.

Project L.I.F.T. Mission and Goals

In 2010, some of Charlotte's leading philanthropists began taking stock of dismal graduation rates in the city's highest-poverty schools and the growing student achievement gap between poor and minority students and their more affluent peers. By January 2011, a funder collaborative had coalesced around the goal of supporting district efforts to address these challenges. Their strategy targeted the West Charlotte corridor, defined as West Charlotte High School and the elementary and middle schools that feed into it, for intensive intervention-based teaching and learning reforms that could ultimately be replicated across the district. Thus Project Leadership & Investment For Transformation, or Project L.I.F.T., was born.

A five-year district turnaround initiative, Project L.I.F.T. is focused on achieving three specific "90-90-90" goals:¹

- 90 percent of West Charlotte High School students will graduate on time.
- 90 percent of L.I.F.T. students will achieve proficiency in reading and math.
- 90 percent of students in the West Charlotte corridor will achieve more than one year's academic growth in one year's time.



Created through a public-private partnership among several members of Charlotte’s philanthropic community and CMS, Project L.I.F.T. is financed by \$55 million in philanthropic funds and in-kind donations primarily from Charlotte’s biggest private and corporate foundations. The initiative aims to achieve its goals through investments in four areas of educational intervention known as the Project L.I.F.T. pillars:

- **Talent:** Improving teacher quality by effectively recruiting, training, retaining, and rewarding high-performing principals and teachers.
- **Time:** Increasing learning opportunities and implementing year-round school calendars to give students more time for learning.
- **Technology:** Closing the technology gap between well-resourced and less-resourced schools and communities by providing access to and increasing effective use of technology to facilitate learning.
- **Parent and Community Engagement:** Giving parents, guardians, and community members the tools they need to advocate effectively for children’s education needs, thereby laying the foundation for community support to sustain effective L.I.F.T. interventions.

Now midway through implementation, Project L.I.F.T. is an initiative that other communities are watching. Its funders intended for others, including CMS schools and other districts in North Carolina and across the country, to learn from L.I.F.T.’s experience, achievements, and shortfalls. The funders commissioned this case study to capture the successes and lessons of Project L.I.F.T. through the 2014–15 school year.

Early successes

A strategic plan provides a roadmap for achieving Project L.I.F.T.’s 90-90-90 goals. Since the 2012–13 school year, a number of strategies aligned with the four L.I.F.T. pillars have been implemented. That some strategies overlap in objectives reflects the interrelatedness of the L.I.F.T. pillars.

Talent: New recruiting, training, and retention practices in the L.I.F.T. feeder zone, or learning community, have resulted in increased teacher retention—55 percent in L.I.F.T.’s first year, 2012–13, to 61 percent at the beginning of L.I.F.T.’s second year, 2013–14²—and in retention of its highest-performing teachers at a rate of 86 percent from 2012–13 to 2013–14.³ The number of vacancies in L.I.F.T. schools at the beginning of each year has also decreased significantly. In 2012–13, L.I.F.T. had nearly 300 vacancies to fill; in 2014–15, the L.I.F.T. learning community started school with only five vacancies. Implementation of Opportunity Culture, a teacher staffing design, elicited more than 800 applications for 27 new Opportunity Culture positions in spring 2014.



The L.I.F.T. learning community has transformed from a hard-to-staff learning community to a recruiting pool for talent to lead other challenging schools. At least 15 L.I.F.T. principals and assistant principals have moved to leadership positions in the district or other CMS Title I schools since Project L.I.F.T. was implemented.

Time: L.I.F.T. and CMS obtained a waiver for the L.I.F.T. learning community from a state law dictating when school starts and ends for all North Carolina public schools, enabling L.I.F.T. to implement two extended-learning time calendars beginning in 2013–14. Two schools have students attend for 180 days and two other schools for 199 days between August and July, eliminating the long summer break associated with “summer learning loss.” The L.I.F.T. Academy, a credit recovery program at West Charlotte High School targeting over-age and under-credited students served 75 students, and helped graduate about 40 seniors who had been at risk of not finishing school on time.

Technology: Through partnerships with technology providers and the support of one L.I.F.T. funder particularly focused on improving effective community communications, L.I.F.T. infused its schools with computer hardware. During the 2012–13 and 2013–14 school years, L.I.F.T. distributed more than 3,300 XO laptops to K–4 students and tablets to all ninth-graders at West Charlotte High School. L.I.F.T. also created opportunities for 369 L.I.F.T. families to bring technology into their homes with subsidized laptop and broadband access packages. With CMS now leading one-to-one technology deployment in schools, L.I.F.T.’s focus has shifted to helping teachers use technology effectively in the classroom.

Parent and community engagement: Efforts to fold its schools’ families and the West Charlotte corridor community into L.I.F.T. have been pursued primarily through public relations and partnerships with community organizations. L.I.F.T. has set up

a social media network to communicate with families; coordinated family and community-centered events, including reviving a popular community festival once sponsored by the city; and, in partnership with community health organizations, provided immunizations to more than 650 students and dental services to 700 students.

Early progress toward goals

As of this writing, two years' worth of available data⁴ suggest L.I.F.T. has made some progress toward its goals.

- The graduation rate at West Charlotte has improved from 56 percent in 2011–12⁵ to 78 percent in 2013–14,⁶ more than halfway to the 90 percent goal.
- In reading, math, and science, 54 percent of L.I.F.T. students exceeded growth, and in L.I.F.T.'s first two years of implementation, five of nine schools met or exceeded expected growth in all subject areas.⁷
- The average on-grade-level proficiency across L.I.F.T. schools increased on math, reading, and science end-of-year assessments from 2012–13 to 2013–14.⁸ Statistical analysis of the L.I.F.T. average proficiency scores compared with state average proficiency scores on end-of-year assessments indicates that L.I.F.T. schools decreased the performance gap from its first year of implementation in 2012–13 to its second in 2013–14.⁹

Early lessons

Intended to be a learning laboratory for other urban districts, the Charlotte philanthropic community and district have already gleaned some important early lessons from L.I.F.T. Since L.I.F.T.'s inception, other public-private partnerships have emerged in Charlotte to address community challenges, with some adapting L.I.F.T. governance and implementation elements.

The business of turning around low-performing schools is hard and thoughtful work that takes time. The L.I.F.T. funders invested considerable time researching and developing a strategy to improve graduation rates and student outcomes in the West Charlotte corridor. A year of planning preceded actual implementation of the L.I.F.T. strategy, and included a successful lobbying effort for necessary legislative changes that would allow L.I.F.T. to extend the calendar year in some schools. Improved graduation rates and growth in student achievement suggest that the investments in planning and strategy are yielding results. But at its midpoint, much work remains to meet L.I.F.T.'s well-publicized achievement goals. The complexity of the L.I.F.T. design makes it challenging to determine direct causes of successes. At this point, some of the clearest lessons from L.I.F.T. are about implementation and collaboration.

Taking a learning stance generates many benefits. As noted, the funders always intended that L.I.F.T. would be a learning process. From the beginning, the funders who launched L.I.F.T. in partnership with the school district took a learning stance. This openness to learning has reaped multiple layers of benefits. As the initiative progresses, the learning has informed adjustments in the L.I.F.T. implementation strategy as well as the work of the funders as education philanthropists. L.I.F.T. also serves as an incubator of both evidence-based practices and bold but untested new ideas for the district to observe and replicate.

Trust and leadership in public-private partnerships are critical elements for success. Public-private partnerships with the scale and ambition of L.I.F.T. are relatively rare. With few models to emulate, anticipating every need and potential pitfall in such a partnership can present challenges separate from an initiative's focal activities. A high level of trust between the L.I.F.T. funders and the school district's leadership team, fueled by consistent commitment and active partnership, provides the foundation with a strong working relationship that has helped the initiative weather significant challenges, including three turnovers in the district's superintendent.

It's not all about the money. Often in high-profile philanthropic ventures, the money is the main headline, but it's not the clearest lens for understanding the work or goals. With L.I.F.T., the early focus on the amount of money pooled by the funders laid the groundwork for criticism when the initiative has faltered, created some envy among other district schools, and obscured the hard decisions and prioritization of investments necessitated by finite funding. L.I.F.T. quickly shifted its branding and communications approach, but early expectations created by the initial attention to the \$55 million philanthropic investment have been challenging to reframe.

Upfront investments in planning reap later dividends. Funders took a deliberate approach from the start, creating a seven-month study group of philanthropists, district leaders, and prominent citizens with roots in the West Charlotte corridor. While the L.I.F.T. strategic framework developed by the funder-district partnership provided an overall structure, the initiative hired only one person to lead the design of the initiative's strategy during the first year of planning. Looking back, L.I.F.T. stakeholders recognize that a planning year with a complete team may have improved implementation and accelerated the attainment of project goals. In particular, hindsight reveals that the lack of clarity in strategic planning produced uneven results in community engagement and technology objectives.

Both short-and long-term goals have value. L.I.F.T.'s "90-90-90 goals" have inspired and resonated with the funders, school staff, district leadership, and broader community eager to halt the academic decline of Charlotte's northwest corridor. But the reality is that the full impact of L.I.F.T. will not be known in five years. The relationship between investments in early education and graduation rates cannot be known in five years; and while graduation rates have improved significantly since L.I.F.T. began, more significant dividends are expected as programmatic investments

gain traction over time. In the meantime, the well-publicized 90-90-90 goals have established lofty expectations that risk L.I.F.T. being unduly viewed as a failure if these goals are not achieved. The successes L.I.F.T. has achieved so far suggest that clearly defined and publicly communicated short-term goals may have been a way to balance realistic expectations against aspirational goals.

At the midpoint, some strategies seem to be working. Though L.I.F.T. continues to pursue its 90-90-90 goals, data and qualitative feedback suggest that strategies in the Talent and Time pillars are having their intended effect. Together, strategies focused on recruitment, hiring, and the delivery of professional development have reduced teacher vacancies year to year, while increasing the number of teachers applying for L.I.F.T. school positions and the number of effective teachers staying in L.I.F.T. schools. In addition, the L.I.F.T. Academy has helped increase West Charlotte High School's graduation rate. These successes partly reflect the amount of investment and focus L.I.F.T. has devoted to the Talent and Time pillars and affirm the potential for collective investments to effect large-scale change.

A consistent and strategic communications strategy is critical and worth funding adequately. From the beginning, the L.I.F.T. funders recognized the importance of including the West Charlotte corridor community in discussions about the education reforms planned for its schools. The funders intentionally solicited feedback from the community, gaining goodwill. But uneven public relations and communication efforts since L.I.F.T. was implemented have allowed its achievements to



be overshadowed by media attention to the dollar amount behind L.I.F.T. and the 90-90-90 goals. In addition, a few vocal critics have successfully succeeded in airing a message in the media that because L.I.F.T. is not tackling the root causes of poverty or segregated schools, it will inevitably fail.

Charlotte leaders have an opportunity to use the L.I.F.T. initiative to address the city's entrenched issues of race and poverty. Critics of L.I.F.T. charge that strategies centered solely on improving segregated schools cannot possibly address the root causes of poverty and low academic achievement. L.I.F.T.'s supporters counter that while schools cannot solve these problems completely, they can make a massive, measurable difference in the lives of poor and minority children. At a time when many Americans are wrestling with how to address these issues, funders, district leaders, and community members can use L.I.F.T. as a catalyst to initiate constructive community conversations about race, poverty, and equitable opportunities for students and families citywide.

Project L.I.F.T. is a work in progress. The funders, district, Project L.I.F.T. staff, L.I.F.T. school staff, and community partners continue to strive to meet their 90-90-90 goals by 2018. In the meantime, L.I.F.T. shares what it has learned with CMS, other school districts, and communities that are watching.

ENDNOTES

1. Basic information about Project L.I.F.T. is available at <http://www.projectliftcharlotte.org/>
2. Norton, M., & Piccinino, K. (2014). *Project LIFT: Year two report*. Philadelphia, PA: Research for Action. Retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB4HdLvUXv8hlcok1akVPMUN1SHM/view>
3. Figures are based on Project L.I.F.T. analysis of retention of teachers deemed "Irreplaceables"—the top 25 percent of teachers identified annually by L.I.F.T. staff and principals through forced ranking based on critical competencies and data (for instance, student test scores, leading indicators, parent attendance, etc.).
4. As of this writing, data for 2014–15 is not available. End-of-year assessments are administered in June, with results publicized later in the summer.
5. Figures are pulled from the state website's data generator at <http://accrpt.ncpublicschools.org/app/2012/cgr/>
6. Figures are pulled from the state website's data generator at <http://accrpt.ncpublicschools.org/app/2014/cgr/>
7. Results from the state Department of Public Instruction growth model, provided by Project L.I.F.T.
8. Norton & Piccinino. (2014). *Project LIFT: Year two report*.
9. This is based on analysis of L.I.F.T. and statewide proficiency data conducted by Public Impact for this case study.

