



Uplift Education, Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas

Charting a new path

Total school buildings (K-12 charter school buildings): 12

Schools housed within those 12 buildings: 28

Total enrollment: approximately 13,000 students, with 7,500 on the waiting list

Students on federal free and reduced-price-lunch program: 84 percent¹

Uplift Education is a network of charter schools serving predominately urban neighborhoods in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. With a diverse student population and an intense focus on college preparation, Uplift Education began with a single charter school—North Hills Preparatory—in a Dallas suburb. Founded by Rosemary Perlmeter, an attorney passionate about expanding educational choice in her community, North Hills Preparatory opened its doors in August 1997. One of the first charter schools in the state of Texas, it struggled for several years to find adequate facilities but was eventually able to finance the purchase and renovation of a facility large enough to house its rapidly growing student population.² As North Hills Preparatory grew, so did its reputation, and admission slots became highly sought after. North Hills Preparatory has been recognized on *Newsweek's* list of the nation's best high schools, as well as *U.S. News & World Report's* list of the top International Baccalaureate programs in the country.³

In 2004, a local nonprofit asked Perlmeter to replicate North Hills Preparatory's success in an urban environment. The result was Peak Preparatory in Central Dallas. Now with two schools, Uplift Education was officially born, with Perlmeter serving as its first executive director. Uplift Education continued to grow and open new schools over the next several years, and in 2009, Yasmin Bhatia was brought on as Uplift's CEO, allowing Perlmeter to begin the transition process out of the day-to-day leadership of the organization to concentrate on the founding of a nonprofit organization, the Teaching Trust. Today, Uplift operates 12 charter buildings in the Dallas-Fort Worth area—with another new building set to open later this year—and employs almost 600 teachers. Uplift's enrollment is rapidly approaching its goal of 13,000 students by 2015, and there is a waitlist of almost 7,500 students.⁴

Uplift's schools are considered open-enrollment charter schools under Texas law, which means they are initiated and run by groups outside of existing public school districts, typically nonprofits or universities.⁵ An open-enrollment charter building in Texas is designed to be an autonomous unit, with greater discretion over decisions related to governance, staffing, and discipline than what is typically given to traditional public schools. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that as Uplift continued to grow as an organization, a major challenge for Bhatia was figuring out how to maintain the autonomous nature of a charter building while still creating system-wide efficiencies and a consistent culture of high expectations.

In 2012, Uplift partnered with Bain & Company, a management-consulting firm working on a pro-bono basis, to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the organization and highlight opportunities for growth. Bain consultants interviewed dozens of Uplift administrators and surveyed its teaching staff. Bain also interviewed other successful charter networks—such as Uncommon Schools, Aspire, and Achievement First—to examine the models they have used as their networks have expanded.

One of Bain's major findings was that school leaders were distracted from their focus on student achievement by their operations-related responsibilities. Furthermore, the study showed that the various Uplift buildings had wide variance in terms of staffing and job responsibilities.⁶ Ultimately, Bain recommended a wholesale restructuring of the Uplift organizational chart, suggesting that the changes would “create greater accountability for Campus Directors to drive student achievement, enable Campus Directors to place increased focus on instruction and culture, and provide all staff with the professional development and coaching they need to be successful.”⁷ Among these recommendations was a general shift toward greater centralized control of schools and school buildings across the Uplift network. The central office would now set minimum standards around curriculum, materials, common assessments, scope and sequence, school schedules, and teacher evaluation. In terms of budget, operations, and human capital management, the central office would set enrollment targets for school buildings, approve nonacademic vendors, monitor building operations, set compensation bands, and work toward the recruitment of talent.

Despite the shift toward more consistency across schools recommended by Bain, the schools would still enjoy some key areas of autonomy. For example, building leaders would retain control over academic and disciplinary interventions, the hiring and firing of staff, and compensation of staff within the compensation bands. Furthermore, so long as they operated within the centrally designed curricular frameworks, schools would enjoy flexibility in terms of materials, assessment, and scheduling.

Perhaps the most noteworthy recommendation made by Bain, however, was to draw a clear dividing line between the academic and operational aspects of the organization, both centrally and at the building level. At the central-office level, two new positions

would be created, the chief academic officer and the chief operating officer, with both positions reporting directly to the CEO. The chief academic officer would oversee the network's college-readiness program as well as other strategic policy initiatives. Furthermore, the director of teaching effectiveness—who supervises instructional coaches and specialists—would report directly to the chief academic officer. The chief operating officer would oversee student nutrition, instructional technology, and facilities.⁸ These two new positions were in addition to a chief administrative officer, chief development officer, chief financial officer, and a senior director of special education, all of who would continue to report directly to the CEO.⁹

At the K-12 level, each school level—primary, middle, and high—would have its own director, with one of the directors serving as the lead for the building. Each building director would oversee a dean or assistant principal assigned to that building as well as a counselor/intervention specialist. The high school director would have two deans as well as an athletic director and a college-readiness director. Furthermore, a special-education coordinator would report to the lead director but serve all grades K-12.

The most significant change recommended at the building level was the creation of a building operations director who would be responsible for all the noninstructional aspects of the operation, such as budgeting, building maintenance, student health services, and student nutrition. The building operations director would report to a regional operations director. In contrast to the School Administration Manager model, where management duties might be delegated to an assistant principal or even an administrative assistant, the building operations director would be a position of high authority and responsibility—a position that Uplift CEO Bhatia referred to as a “peer-level” position to the building director.¹⁰ Unfortunately, finding qualified building operations directors has proven to be more difficult than expected. Bhatia reports that candidates rarely have both the necessary management expertise and sufficient experience in an educational setting to fully understand how operational decisions impact the instructional program and culture of the school.¹¹ With a highly functioning building operations director in place, however, the director and deans are relieved of myriad managerial responsibilities and duties and are better able to focus attention on instruction and culture.

In the 2013-14 school year, with this basic restructuring at the building level freeing directors and deans from noninstructional responsibilities, Uplift was ready to implement a robust teacher-evaluation program that included ongoing observation and feedback for all teachers. The system, which holds teachers accountable for the percentage of students who hit individual achievement targets, also requires a minimum of two full observations and four targeted observations during the course of the year. School leaders assess teachers across a set of eight core competencies and are required to conduct reviews twice annually, during which time they give teachers specific performance feedback. Uplift invested money from a Michael & Susan Dell Foundation

grant into a system-wide electronic system that allows school leaders to input observation data that can be accessed by district leaders at any time, thus enabling them to monitor the amount of observation data that is being collected at the building level and identify instructional trends across buildings. For example, most teachers in Uplift had already been observed at least half a dozen times during the first semester alone, reported Chief Academic Officer Richard Harrison. He noted that 60 percent to 70 percent of the feedback given to teachers had been around the issue of student engagement and culture.¹²

For Uplift, ongoing observation and feedback is a central theme, and it is applied at both the teacher and leadership levels. Managing directors are assigned as coaches to school directors, who are observed three times per semester—once while leading a data meeting, once while conducting a staff-development session, and once while conferring with a teacher. Based upon these observations, directors are given midyear feedback on a core set of competencies and also receive quarterly visits from CEO Bhatia and chief academic officer Harrison. Furthermore, directors undergo a critical exercise, known as a “case consultancy,” in which they present their building strategic plans for peer review.¹³ This practice allows directors a safe environment to pose problems of practice to their peers and receive specific feedback for improving their building plans.

Another academic support put in place for directors in the Uplift network is the internal school review, or ISR. This process is similar in some ways to Harvard Professor Richard Elmore’s “Instructional Rounds in Education,” though with a more evaluative focus.¹⁴ ISR teams are comprised of roughly 6 to 11 members, who may be from the Uplift central office, other buildings, or even from other charter organizations. The team first meets to review a school’s strategic plan before spending the day observing classrooms and interviewing both teachers and students. At the end of the day, the ISR team meets with school leadership to provide peer feedback on leadership competencies, benchmarking against the school’s strategic plan, an aggregate snapshot of instructional quality, and recommendations to accelerate progress.¹⁵ School leadership then uses the ISR feedback to appropriately adjust the strategic plan. This process occurs once per semester on each Uplift building.

Twice per year, Uplift stages a two-day training seminar—or leadership academy—for all network administrators, including those in the central office. These leadership academies offer administrators opportunities for meaningful networking and collaborations, as well as opportunities to examine various case studies and to model network protocols, such as the above-referenced case consultancy.¹⁶ Building operations managers are not forgotten; the managers are brought together once monthly for training sessions during which they focus on best practices to improve operational effectiveness.¹⁷

In addition to the aforementioned support structures for in-service directors, Uplift has several practices in place to recruit and train the next generation of school leaders. The Uplift Aspiring Leaders Program is a fast-track program to identify and accelerate the readiness of teachers within the system who show strong leadership potential. The cohorts meet monthly and focus on network-wide initiatives such as data-driven decision making, handling difficult conversations, and managing up.¹⁸

For those who seek to earn state credentials as well as master's degrees, Uplift partners with the Aspiring Ed-Leaders Program—a collaborative partnership between the Teaching Trust—a Dallas-based nonprofit—and the Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development at Southern Methodist University, or SMU.¹⁹ The Teaching Trust, which was co-founded by Perlmeter after she stepped down from daily management of Uplift, understands that leadership at a variety of levels is a high-impact lever in both a charter organization's ability to grow with quality as well as a traditional school district's ability to successfully manage transformational change. Like the Denver Public Schools' partnerships with the University of Denver and Get Smart Schools, the Teaching Trust-SMU partnership is part of the Alliance to Reform Education Leadership network run by the Bush Institute, which is housed in the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum on the SMU campus. Uplift employees who are accepted into the program take classes for a full year, during which time they interact with aspiring leaders from other partner districts or organizations such as Dallas Independent School District and the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP. Upon completion of the classwork, candidates are placed in a building leadership role for a year-long residency. Teaching Trust students are granted scholarships that cover a large portion of their tuition and expenses in exchange for an agreement to work in the Uplift network for a minimum of three years after completing their residency—making the entire program a five-year commitment.²⁰

Districts that are interested in helping principals tighten their focus on instructional improvement would be well served to study Uplift's efforts in this regard. As a charter school network, Uplift is unique, but what it has done to support directors and deans would be replicable in a variety of settings, including many traditional public school districts. The culture of continuous feedback, high expectations, and thoughtful organizational structure supports school leaders and allows them to focus squarely on their *raison d'être*—improving teaching and learning.

Endnotes

- 1 Uplift Education, "Ensuring Their Success: Annual Report 2013" (2013), available at http://www.uplifteducation.org/cms/lib01/TX01001293/Centricity/Domain/6/2013_Annual_Report.pdf.
- 2 Uplift Education, "A Guide to Success at Uplift Education" (2013). Received via personal communication from Yasmin Bhatia, CEO, Uplift Education, and Richard Harrison, chief academic officer, Uplift Education, December 19, 2013.
- 3 Uplift North Hills Preparatory, "Achievements," available at <http://www.northhillsprep.org/domain/152> (last accessed March 2014).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 TEC, §12.101.
- 6 Bain & Company, "Uplift Education Board Update: Aligning for Organizational Growth" (2012). Received via personal communication from Yasmin Bhatia, CEO, Uplift Education, and Richard Harrison, chief academic officer, Uplift Education, December 19, 2013.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Yasmin Bhatia and Richard Harrison, phone interview with authors, November 26, 2013.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Elizabeth A. City, Richard F. Elmore, and Sarah E. Fiarman, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Teaching and Learning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009).
- 15 Uplift Education, "A Guide to Success at Uplift Education."
- 16 Ibid.
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- 19 Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development, "Urban School Specialization," available at http://www.smu.edu/Simmons/AreasOfStudy/EPL/M_Ed_Urban_Leadership (last accessed June 2014).
- 20 Teaching Trust, "Aspiring Ed-Leaders Program," available at <http://www.teachingtrust.org/leadership-programs/med-urban-schools> (last accessed June 2014).