



Transatlantic School Innovation Alliance

PROMOTING INNOVATION AND PROGRESS IN A U.S.–U.K. NETWORK OF SCHOOLS

Report on the 2007-2008 School Year

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The Transatlantic School Innovation Alliance (TSIA) was conceived after conferences in the United States and London where common issues in urban education were addressed by national-, state-, and city-level policy-makers and practitioners. The conferences surfaced the possibility of a network of schools in London and New York City that would incorporate the best thinking about urban education systems, practice, and policy.

The Annenberg Foundation provided generous funding to support the Annenberg Institute's participation in planning, operating, and capturing learning from the Alliance. New Visions for Public Schools, a major nonprofit organization working on systemic reform of New York City's public schools, is the Institute's key strategic partner on the U.S. side of the Alliance; the Department for Children, Schools, and Families (Joint International Unit)¹ is the U.K. co-sponsor. TSIA is governed by a board composed of representatives of these entities. A small steering committee works with a part-time project director on each side to manage the initiative.

TSIA was launched in 2006-2007 with a pilot year involving two schools: Marble Hill School for International Studies in the Bronx and Bow School for Boys in London's Tower Hamlets. Key features of the early operation of the Alliance were maintained and strengthened as TSIA expanded to six schools in each city² for 2007-2008 and included semi-annual cross-national study visits by educators (five days each in New York City and London); periodic virtual meetings via telephone, Skype, and videoconference; student literacy learning as a basis for the adult exchange; and participation in TSIA by both a principal (or head teacher) and a lead practitioner (teacher).

THE 2007-2008 SCHOOL YEAR: INCREASED SCALE, MORE TARGETED FOCUS

The Alliance was expanded to six schools on each side for its second year of operation, with participation determined by an application-based selection process. Along with the expansion, the TSIA board also determined that the focus and purpose of the exchange should be sharpened to target action research into adolescent literacy and communications skills. TSIA also instituted a requirement for regular reporting by each school's lead practitioner. (Stipends were provided for this purpose to New York lead practitioners.)

Schools were provided with profile information (location, demographics, specialties/curricular foci) and Web links to the other TSIA schools. Each school was asked to identify and prioritize three schools in the other city that it would be interested in partnering with and to indicate why. Based on that information, project staff created three clusters of four schools – with two New York and two London schools in each cluster. The intent of the clustering was to facilitate communication, relationship building, and joint work of both faculty and students that would be impossible in the larger set.

¹ Known as the Department for Education and Skills at the time TSIA was founded in 2006; the Innovation Unit, Ltd., and the Schools and Academies Trust have also been involved in the U.K. partnership.

² In New York: Bronx Engineering and Technology Academy, Bronx Leadership Academy II, High School for Telecommunications, Arts, and Technology, Manhattan Bridges High School, Marble Hill School for International Studies, and the School for Community Research and Learning; in London: Bow School, City of London Academy, Leigh Technology Academy, Lilian Baylis School, Skinners' Company's School for Girls, and Westminster Academy.

The major TSIA-wide activities for the 2007-2008 year were the reciprocal study visits. The entire delegation of New York schools, along with the Institute and New Visions, joined in hosting the fall study visit to New York on November 3–7, 2007. All six New York schools also participated in the reciprocal visit to London from February 26 to March 1, 2008. Primary activities during the study visits included school visits, discussions of U.S. and U.K. education and accountability policies, and development of the action research plans within each cluster. In addition, during International Education Week in November 2007, two students from each school participated in a videoconference on global citizenship hosted by the British Consulate General in New York City and the office of the Cultural Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in London.

Knowledge management support was increased through the creation of dedicated TSIA space on New Visions' Web-based knowledge-sharing platform known as KBase, allowing for threaded discussions of cluster work and uploading of documents. Representatives from TSIA schools on both sides of the Atlantic were offered training on KBase. Consistent with the literacy focus, New Visions provided support for 30 percent of a lead facilitator with expertise in school practices to foster literacy improvement for underperforming students.

DOCUMENTATION AND INTERNAL EVALUATION

An increased effort to document the development, activities, and impact of TSIA was planned to accompany the rapid growth in numbers of schools from Year 1 to Year 2. The results of that effort comprise the remainder of this report.

TSIA relied on several methods of documentation. First, lead practitioners sent monthly reports detailing literacy strategies used, data collected, and work with cluster schools. During the professional development

³ Every school in New York is required to have an inquiry team, including administrative and teaching staff, that is charged with designing and evaluating an academic intervention for a group of struggling students. The TSIA action research project was designed to overlap with the work of each school's inquiry team in order to tie TSIA work to a required accountability mechanism for schools.

visits in New York and London, the steering group collected survey data on the content and effectiveness of those visits.

Two site visits to all New York TSIA schools were conducted in March and June. In March, a research associate from the Annenberg Institute was accompanied by a literacy specialist from New Visions to observe classroom practice and some school-inquiry teams³ and give feedback to practitioners. Institute staff also conducted short, formative interviews with lead practitioners and principals. In June, all lead practitioners and principals were interviewed at length on their work with TSIA. Additionally, staff at New Visions were interviewed for their perspectives as a partner support organization.

FINDINGS

✦ Student engagement drives enthusiasm and best practices.

At the beginning of the school year, the TSIA steering group and board had agreed to focus the goals and activities of the Alliance on sharing best practices in literacy among teachers and administrators in the twelve schools. The underlying theory behind this decision was to limit the possibility that the Alliance would turn into a set of student “pen-pal exchanges” that did not focus on sharing pedagogical best practices. However, there was pushback from teachers on this decision. To the practitioners, student engagement drives both student and teacher enthusiasm, which are equally necessary to develop and share best practices. Without strong student engagement, the work of TSIA would not be grounded in actual day-to-day practice and would remain in the world of the “theoretical,” as one practitioner put it.

As a result of this pushback from the schools, the TSIA steering group decided to allow a much greater level of student engagement. Lead practitioners remarked at the end of the school year that student excitement at being able to communicate with peers in London not only drove teacher engagement, but also led to greater improvements in students' literacy skills. Writing for an

“external audience,” according to several teachers, led students to reflect on and edit their writing to a much greater extent than before their involvement in TSIA. Said one teacher:

The peer interaction was motivating for my students. I changed my content to embrace the peer-to-peer interaction because they were more concerned with the quality of their work knowing their London peers would be reading and evaluating it. [The interaction], in turn, allowed for a better dialogue about their strengths and weaknesses because the reason for their work was more authentic to them. Decoding led to discussions about appropriate language, which led to appropriate writing formats and appropriate speaking techniques. . . . I am in the process of rewriting the curriculum for next year, and it is rooted in the collaboration between [our London partner school] and my school.

✦ Transatlantic partnership provides a “safe space” to talk about practice.

Principals and lead practitioners were asked, “Why have a transatlantic partnership? Why not connect schools in New York City and Chicago, or even just within the city?” Most of the responses to this question centered on the idea that transatlantic partnerships offer a “safe space” to talk about practice without the built-in assumptions that a teacher in Chicago or a principal in New York would bring to the discussion. This communication among London and New York principals and practitioners was greatly enriched by the face-to-face study visits. Following the London study visit in February, participants were asked to reflect on what they had learned during the visit. One practitioner wrote:

As a teacher, it’s very easy to be bogged down in my own world, classroom, and ideas, almost to the exclusion of anything else. Even with this project, it’s easy to be engrossed in selfish ideas of what I have to accomplish. This self-indulgence of thought is obviously very limiting, but it’s also stress inducing, as you think your own practice is more important than maybe it is. I’ve changed some, in the sense that I’ve seen so many good,

innovative practices and thoughts that the broader goal of a good, sustained relationship is more important than (or as important as) selfish classroom goals.

Another practitioner reflecting on the study visit not only pointed out the differences between the American and British educational systems, but how she could adopt some of the values of the British system in her own classroom and school:

When we visited the British schools, it was clear that their system values transparency more than my particular school. It was astonishing to see that the students were clearly aware of their performance weaknesses and strengths in relation to the national exams. The entire grading system is so clear that the students, teachers, and administrators can track growth or deficiency easily. This gives the students ownership of their progress, since they have the language to identify what they need or do not need. . . .

Although I found this system to be too rigid, it did provoke me to make my standards and assessments clearer. On the first day of school after the trip, I handed out a survey for my targeted students. The survey examined the clarity of my assessments and teaching methods. I found that the students were not clear about how to achieve a particular grade or where their strengths and weaknesses lie. By opening up that discussion, the students took more ownership for progress because we began to clarify assessments and the evaluation process together. I found the students were more willing to ask for help and had the language needed to home in on what they felt they needed. We began to develop and assess together, making the experience more authentic.

✦ Local networks can be strengthened through international partnership.

Even though principals and lead practitioners were clear about the benefits of international partnership, they did not discount their New York City partner schools. One principal remarked that it was strange that it took TSIA to put him in communication with

other New York City schools. The opportunity to get out of his day-to-day practice at his high school and travel to another borough to observe practice and talk with other principals was incredibly valuable and has even led to mentoring relationships between experienced and novice principals in TSIA New York schools. Indirectly, then, TSIA has highlighted the lack of system supports for peer-to-peer learning in New York.

★ **The partnership has demonstrated the potential to move from “transference” of practice to “conscious adaptation and reflection” of best practices.**

Placing the twelve TSIA schools into three clusters offered a rich opportunity to see different models of relationships, communication, and best practices. We can draw several tentative conclusions about these partnerships:

- Partnerships with shared work (e.g., classroom lessons) are more likely to succeed than partnerships where work is independent. One partnership between a school in New York and a school in London had practitioners developing common student assignments, expectations, and instruments. The level of communication between the two practitioners was high (several e-mails a week), and relationships among students in both schools were much stronger than in schools where there was no shared work.
- Schools with dedicated classroom time where the lead practitioner works with inquiry students are more effective than situations where lead practitioners do not teach all inquiry students, or where the students were in an after-school or lunchtime club. The pace of partnership development, the quality of student interaction, and the numbers of students involved were all greater in schools with daily, dedicated classroom time for TSIA work.
- Moving effective practice from one teacher to a schoolwide phenomenon was observed at one New York high school, where the lead practitioner adapted a “word of the week” lesson from his London counterpart. This practice involved teaching a particular word – for example, *analyze* – across disciplines. It required more than one teacher to

implement effectively. After a few adaptations, this practice was adopted schoolwide. It was also video-recorded by New Visions and made accessible to its network of high schools. This adoption of practice was successful for several reasons, including strong principal support and continuous reflection between the lead practitioners at the New York and London schools.

In most cases, adoption of best practices took place under a “transference” model rather than an “adaptation and reflection” model – a teacher or principal saw an intriguing practice at a partner school, took it back to his/her school, adapted it, and put it into practice. While this may have led to improved teacher practice and student learning, it did not necessarily lead to strong, ongoing partnerships between schools. In two cases, however, best practices were adopted in a culture of continuous adaptation and reflection, where learning went in both directions. Improving understanding of what enables and sustains this deeper level of exchange is a goal for the Alliance moving forward.

★ **Communication continues to be a work in progress.**

A high level and quality of communication is essential for any international partnership. TSIA has made important strides in facilitating communication among its schools in the past year, but significant challenges remain. Schools in New York have widely varying access to communication tools, especially videoconferencing technology. While some schools have in-house videoconferencing technology, other schools have to travel off-site for this type of communication. E-mail continues to be the primary method of communication among principals and lead practitioners. Practitioners and principals also stressed the importance of face-to-face contact through the professional development visits, and that the quality of these interactions could not be duplicated through electronic means of communication.

Two new communications strategies were employed this year. First, New Visions has developed a systemwide knowledge platform, KBase, where users can post information and have threaded discussions with

colleagues. Several TSIA practitioners in both New York and London were trained on KBase. Second, in the spring of 2008, the Annenberg Institute hosted New York City-wide conference calls to share best practices. These calls were effective in spreading knowledge beyond individual clusters and will be continued in the 2008-2009 school year.

KBase is already a useful repository for information about TSIA activities, for literacy resources, and for documentation of effective practices and collaborative work of students or teachers. However, KBase has not become embedded in the TSIA work as a communications platform or a location for collaborative work within and across clusters. One clear reason for that is that e-mail is a faster and more straightforward approach to conversation or sharing across schools, especially if only a few practitioners are involved and if time is precious – as teachers invariably tell us it is.

★ Principals benefited from moving their discussions beyond literacy to a broader set of issues.

While the primary focus of TSIA is on sharing best practices in literacy, principals also reported taking a great deal away from their experiences in the Alliance. First, as reported above, several principals noted the benefits of being able to talk with other principals on issues unrelated to adolescent literacy. Second, New York principals were fascinated by the U.K.'s accountability system and its parallels to New York City's system (which has been strongly influenced by the U.K.). One principal said that going to London was "like looking into the future" in terms of the U.K.'s strong accountability system. Whether or not New York principals agreed with these policies, there was strong interest in understanding the U.K.'s accountability provisions, and they were especially interested by a talk given by a London principal on the U.K.'s inspectorate system.

★ The partnership structure allows distributed leadership to emerge.

The structure of TSIA – with the involvement of both a principal and lead practitioner – created the space for new and distributed forms of educational leadership to emerge. At one New York TSIA school, a young

lead practitioner used TSIA to explore new leadership roles and to think about his possible future as an administrator:

One of the biggest ways TSIA has affected me personally is through the fact that it put me in a different role in my school. This was the first time I took part in an extended conversation with my principal, other principals, and other decision-makers in schools. I enjoyed the behind-the-scenes look at how schools work and what needs to be done to help improve them. . . . I also enjoyed [the] leadership opportunity that this has created for me in the school. I have always thought about possibly pursuing an administrator's job, specifically a principal, and this job [with TSIA] I think has solidified the fact that I one day hope to become a principal.

ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK, DOCUMENTATION, AND EVALUATION

Commonalities and differences in project design in New York City and London presented a challenge.

One of the attributes that makes TSIA successful is that the New York and London approaches are jointly planned but partly common and partly tailored to local context. This makes for some operational and knowledge-building challenges. For example, tying TSIA to the inquiry teams in New York schools meant that involved students were in the bottom third on achievement. In London there was no such requirement, and student placement varied from school to school. This sometimes led to feelings of frustration and inadequacy among New York City teachers and students.

The approach to research and evaluation was another area that was affected by different approaches. What was learned in the past year was partly driven by what mattered most to particular individuals on each side and to the sponsoring organizations on each side, so it wasn't always possible to get a complete storyline across New York and London (e.g., on the transference of practice question).

Consistency in exposure to literacy strategies is essential for students.

The connection of New York TSIA work to the inquiry teams mandated citywide increased the stakes attached to participating. In some cases, students being tracked by the inquiry team were in different classes and programs; and the exposure to multiple interventions made it very difficult to figure out what was “moving” students. This led to realizations about the need for regular, consistent contact of the TSIA lead practitioner with participating students.

Multiple forms of communication are required and must be adaptable to principal and teacher needs.

For the Alliance to be effective, multiple methods of communication are required across various groupings of participants. New York schools are technologically ill equipped in comparison to their London counterparts, but the continuing challenges of communication involve time, time zones, working habits, and school culture as much as they do telecommunications hardware. Participants need constant reminders to engage in some forms of communications, such as KBase, and time and exposure to experience their potential as collaborative and dissemination tools. An increase in school-based videoconferencing capability is needed and will support the relationship building begun in face-to-face exchanges. Documenting and addressing the communication needs with the expansion to sixteen schools in 2008-2009 will have significant implications for the spread of TSIA-related practices within and across schools and for future expansion of the Alliance.

Student engagement is ready to move to the next level.

Student engagement has been a driver for action research and for sharing of literacy practices across partner schools in TSIA’s second year. Project leadership on both sides of the Atlantic is committed to building on the very limited opportunities for student face-to-face work provided thus far to devise TSIA-wide student exchange and learning opportunities.

PRIORITIES FOR THE 2008-2009 YEAR

Several programmatic and management adjustments to address issues noted above have already been made or are under way. These include:

- revised reporting protocols and documentation instruments that support greater alignment and depth in data collection;
- requirements for a minimum number of teacher contact hours with the targeted students, and limitation of potential lead practitioners to those in literacy-related fields, including English-language learning;
- availability of up to \$3,000 per school to support the TSIA work that can be used toward technology, professional development, or other approved project costs;
- additional staff time devoted to populating KBase with relevant resources as well as moderating discussions and encouraging sharing of effective practices;
- additional staff time devoted to qualitative data collection at school sites;
- training in the use of hardware and KBase at school sites instead of centrally (at the New Visions office).

After two years of planning and operation, TSIA has begun to yield some of the practice and policy ideas and lessons originally envisioned and hoped for and is poised to yield many more. We will continue research in New York and in collaboration with our London partners and plan to publicly share lessons, best practices, and ideas and questions meriting further development that emerge from this work.