

THE
CENTERBRIDGE-BAIN
PARTNERSHIP GRANT

**ACHIEVEMENT
NETWORK**

2017

 **CPRL** | Center for Public
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Introduction

The Partnership Grant (“Partnership Grant”) is a collaboration launched in 2012 by the Centerbridge Foundation (“Centerbridge”) and Bain & Company (“Bain”) with the goal to co-invest in a small portfolio of innovative, education-focused nonprofit organizations with established track records in New York City that are capable of achieving significant and sustained impact on student outcomes. Through this unique partnership, Centerbridge commits grant funding of up to \$500,000 over a 4-year period and Bain contributes pro bono consulting expertise focused on a strategic initiative. Partnership Grant recipients (“grant partners”) also have access to a range of other resources – such as guidance on external research and evaluation, leadership advisory and coaching, and professional development opportunities – to support continuous learning and increase impact across the portfolio. There are also informal networking and learning opportunities, including events with Centerbridge leadership, offered to grant partners.

Through the Partnership Grant, Centerbridge and Bain seek to drive change at two levels. At the organizational level, they aim to help organizations think and act strategically in order to build capacity to pursue their missions. At the sector level, they work to support and spur the development of “game-changing” ideas in the field of education.

Centerbridge and Bain selected Achievement Network (“ANet”) as the 2014 Partnership Grant recipient. ANet works alongside educators to strengthen student achievement in elementary and middle schools through its coaching services and high-quality assessments, among other resources designed to improve student outcomes. Educators and researchers have affirmed the strength of ANet’s services.^{1,2} In 2016, the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University conducted a randomized control study and found that among schools that received ANet services and that were poised for change, student learning grew an additional six months in two years when compared to students

at similar schools that did not receive ANet services.³ In 2017, the Louisiana Department of Education awarded ANet the highest rating in their evaluation of instructional and assessment resources.⁴

The following case study, prepared by the Center for Public Research and Leadership (“CPRL”) at Columbia University, documents ANet’s progress toward the Partnership Grant goals of building organizational capacity and supporting innovation in the field of education. Support provided through the Partnership Grant enabled ANet to test new approaches to sales and service models that better positioned the organization to increase its impact on student learning. Partnership Grant resources also supported a second stream of work aimed at strengthening ANet’s use of data to drive outcomes. Together, these activities helped ANet strengthen its services to improve teaching and learning and expand its reach into new schools.

Achievement Network

ANet is a nonprofit that partners with schools and school systems (e.g., districts and charter management organizations) to design and implement professional learning experiences tied to accurate and timely access to standards-aligned data. ANet's coaching services, assessments, and resources equip school and system leaders with the skills and practices needed to grow and mature a culture of learning committed to using standards and data to improve student outcomes. ANet coaches visit school partners at least 20 times during each academic year to help school leaders and teachers learn how to interpret and respond to evidence of student learning, particularly by leveraging instructional and assessment practices that are proven to work within their schools. At the same time, both ANet coaches and ANet's network of diverse schools introduce school leaders and teachers to new practices that have improved student outcomes in other places. These services dramatically accelerate student learning, especially in underserved communities.

History and Mission

John Maycock and Marci Cornell-Feist founded ANet in response to educators' need for timely and actionable data. Beginning in 2005, they assembled a team of assessment and content knowledge specialists to design assessments that provided interim evidence of student learning and to create a coaching program to help schools use assessment data.⁵ They built a network of local and national schools to share ideas and collaborate as a way to ensure continuous improvement.

School Support Services

In 2016, ANet worked with approximately 700 schools across 16 states,⁶ including 91 schools in New York City.⁷ ANet provides five services, offered in combination: (1) coaching support, (2) assessments, (3) instructional and assessment resources and tools, (4) access to its partner network, and (5) professional development events (see Appendix A for more detailed information about services).

The full-service coaching model ("core model") combines ANet services and aims to help leaders support great instruction. The core model begins with ANet aligning its interim assessments with school partners' curriculum. Next, ANet collaborates with school partners to create an assessment calendar and schedule of coaching visits. The goal of these coaching visits is to lead school leaders through cycles of planning, teaching, and data analysis that support the implementation of data-based practices and help teachers effectively adopt the practices that will strengthen teaching and learning.⁸ A coaching visit may entail facilitation of, or support with, data meetings, classroom observations, or professional development workshops.⁹ ANet coaches also help schools maximize ANet resources and tools.

Achievement Network and the Partnership Grant

At the time of the Partnership Grant application in 2013, ANet aimed to increase the number of schools it served from 430 to 850 schools by 2017.¹⁰ By reaching this impact goal, ANet would affect teaching and learning for an estimated 250,000 students.¹¹

In pursuit of its 2017 impact goal, ANet leaders started to think more strategically about the organization's growth. In particular, they saw an opportunity to use sales to expand their presence in New York City. The Partnership Grant provided an opportunity to explore how the organization could approach sales in a more strategic way.

Engagement with Bain

ANet's engagement with Bain began in January 2014 with the goal of identifying growth strategies for its New York region. Although Bain's research confirmed that New York City should be a key geographic area in the organization's expansion plan, it also suggested that there would be challenges to growth in the City.¹² Bain found that New York City schools were less incentivized to partner with ANet than schools in other regions given that the New York City Department of Education ("NYCDOE") provided services similar to ANet. Furthermore, the NYCDOE would not cover the costs schools incurred for partnering with ANet.¹³

Therefore, Bain suggested that ANet think about opportunities for national growth by increasing its penetration in its existing network. To do so, Bain recommended that ANet expand its human resource capacity around sales. It also recommended exploring new services and products to attract schools. ANet spent much of the Partnership Grant period focused on developing and implementing these strategies.

First, ANet built sales capacity by creating new roles and organizational structures. ANet wanted to couple its "word of mouth" sales strategy with a more intentional approach to outreach. Bain introduced ANet to the concept of "hunters" and "farmers." Hunters focus on forging new relationships with schools and systems, and farmers sustain existing relationships.

In 2014, ANet reorganized its organizational structure around these concepts. Under the new structure, the Regional Vice Presidents and the Directors of Partnership Development act as hunters. The Executive Director role, formerly one that included sales, now focuses more narrowly on ensuring quality service delivery and maintaining relationships with existing school partners.

The second strategy focused on new services and products of which adjacencies were one option. Adjacencies have the potential to play a key role in sustainable growth.¹⁴ For ANet, adjacent products presented a new approach to serving schools and systems. They could allow ANet to reach more experienced schools and systems, and they could give new clients a lower cost of entry to explore and build trust in ANet services.

Bain stressed the risks associated with adjacencies. Adjacencies carry the risk of "cannibalizing" an organization's core offerings.^{15,16} It was possible that separating the components of ANet's services could undermine their effectiveness, as ANet's coaching support had always been core to its theory of action. ANet also had direct evidence that providing products absent of coaching did not improve teaching. Furthermore, ANet had some evidence that experiencing ANet first as an assessment provider could deter educators from wanting to enlist ANet's coaching services. In contrast, if educators were first exposed to ANet via coaching, evidence suggested that they might be more likely to use ANet's assessment services.

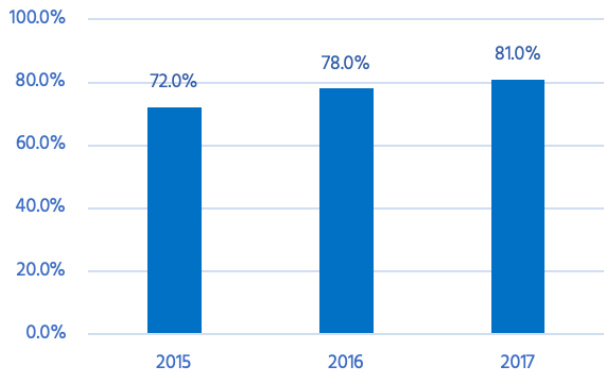
To test the adjacency strategy while minimizing the risks it posed, ANet created and piloted the "tools and resources partnership." In this model, school systems are the primary partner by which educators access ANet's assessment and instructional tools and resources (e.g., sample lesson plans and guides), without the intensive coaching support. ANet piloted the tools and resources partnership with two systems — District

of Columbia Public Schools (“DCPS”) and Denver Public Schools (“DPS”). These districts represented more mature systems with routines, practices, and beliefs that supported the use of data to improve teaching and learning.^{17,18} The culture of data in both these districts reduced the risks of offering ANet tools and resources without its coaching support.

Impact of Growth Strategy

Both growth strategies paid off. The new roles and organizational structure had an impact on sales. During the Partnership Grant period, the customer renewal rate increased, an outcome ANet Vice President of Partnership Development, Carter Romansky, attributes to a more intentional focus on sustaining relationships through farmer roles.

Figure 1: Renewal Rate among Achievement Network Partners, 2015-2017

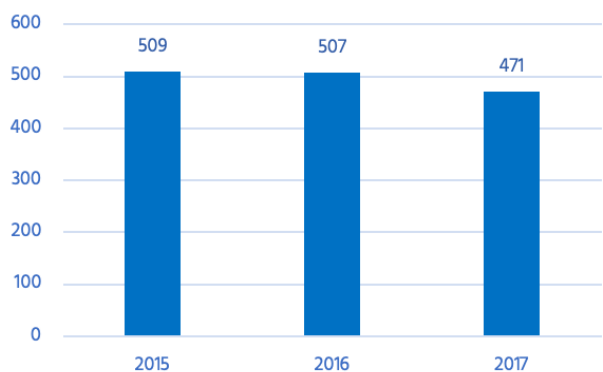


The total number of schools served by ANet between school years 2014-15 and 2015-16 also increased due to the addition of its adjacency option. Through its partnership with DCPS and DPS, ANet attracted a total of 225 schools in the 2015-16 school year and 221 schools in the 2016-17 school year.

Student assessment outcomes in English Language Arts (“ELA”) and math were positive during this period, both for schools receiving the core model and for those systems in the tools and resources partnership. For instance, in DCPS and DPS in 2015-16,¹⁹ students in schools served by the ANet core model or the tools and resources partnership demonstrated greater growth²⁰ than their peers in schools not served by ANet.²¹ In the case of DPS, students in schools served by the tools and resources partnership demonstrated the same growth as those in schools served by the core model.

Although the renewal rate and the total number of schools served increased, it is worth noting that between school years 2015-16 and 2016-17, the organization saw a decline of 8% in the number of schools served by its core model (see Chart 2). Although unexpected due to the increased focus on sales, the decline in the number of schools served by the core model is likely attributable to two changes in ANet’s market. First, federal funding to schools declined, likely meaning that fewer schools could afford ANet services. Second, the momentum behind the Common Core State Standards Initiative (“Common Core”), an initiative to establish nationally recognized learning objectives in ELA and math, waned. One of ANet’s selling points was its expertise in the Common Core. The reduced momentum likely resulted in a reduced demand for services aligned to the Common Core.

Figure 2: Number of School Partners in Achievement Network’s Core Model, 2015-2017



Better Use of Data to Support Growth

In addition to using Partnership Grant resources to fuel its growth, ANet accessed Partnership Grant resources to revisit its theory of action and to strengthen its data practices.

Through Centerbridge, ANet was introduced to a research team at University of Virginia (“UVA”) to explore opportunities to refine its theory of action, strengthen its use of data, and measure impact. Fiona Lin, ANet’s Vice President of Organizational Effectiveness, explained that a revised theory of action would better represent the services ANet provided, would help the organization distinguish between its core service offerings, and would help the organization understand the value it adds to schools and systems.

Ben Castleman, Assistant Professor of Education and Public Policy at UVA's Curry School of Education and Director and Founder of Nudge, and Jim Wyckoff, Professor of Education and Public Policy at UVA's Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy and Director at the Center on Education Policy and Workforce Competitiveness, were brought in given their interest in supporting organizations to prepare for rigorous evaluation and to use data to drive improvement. In the fall of 2016, ANet started working with Castleman and Wyckoff to continue building research capacity.

The work with Castleman and Wyckoff gave ANet the chance to reflect on its services and outcomes.²² Lin explained that the theory of

action conversations helped the organization realize that while student outcomes drive ANet's work, its services pass through systems, school leaders, and others. In order to understand ANet's impact, the organization needed to account for how these various actors affected student learning outcomes.

The revised theory of action has provided the foundation for a data infrastructure and warehousing project that will help the Organizational Effectiveness team create and execute a research agenda. Both these projects will continue through 2018.

Lessons Learned

ANet not only met the partnership's goals outlined during its engagement with Bain but also made progress toward its impact goal of serving 850 schools by 2017. They achieved these goals despite changes to the education landscape. ANet's experience as a grant partner offers lessons learned for the organization and points to considerations for future grant partners.

Pilot Innovations, Adjusting Course Based on Collected Information

"Success is learning when piloting," said Chad Cookinham, a Director of District Partnerships who manages the tools and resources partnership with DPS. This statement describes how ANet thought about the strategies it implemented during the Partnership Grant period. As an education organization committed to the use of data, ANet was set-up to pilot new strategies and practices and carefully collect, review, and respond to evidence of their success.

ANet employed this data-driven practice when developing a sales strategy. In particular, ANet identified the skills needed to launch new partnerships with schools and systems, as well as the skills needed to sustain those partnerships. The implementation of the hunter and farmer roles also gave ANet the chance to test how these roles interact and support one another. As ANet learned more about the implementation of these roles and the reorganization of regions, it adjusted its approach.

ANet's sales strategy also involved a new service — the tools and resources partnership. Rather than rolling out this service at scale, ANet

launched a pilot to better understand the opportunities and risks of the approach. The experience of piloting this service defined ANet as a vendor as opposed to a partner, and ANet learned that being seen as a vendor had at least two implications. First, it meant that some educators saw ANet as "the assessment people" — not as a partner for instructional planning and delivery.^{23,24} Second, as a vendor, the district defined ANet's relationship with schools, which, at times, limited ANet's ability to work with schools in order to strengthen its services.^{25,26}

Going forward, both Directors of District Partnerships are eager to respond to these lessons learned. The Director of District Partnerships with DCPS, Alia Peera, said that future district partnerships that include the tools and resources partnership should involve "more alignment, more buy-in [from schools], choice of schools for them to get coaching, strong professional learning, [and] more control over the messaging." Her interest in securing greater alignment, setting expectations, and offering a broader range of services is consistent with the organization's belief that school leaders and teachers are partners. Her counterpart, Cookinham, echoed her sentiments. Cookinham also plans to gather stronger evidence of how schools use the tools and resources without coaching support.

Select Organizations that Embody Essential Traits for a Productive Grant Partnership

Over the years, Bain and Centerbridge have learned what contributes to the success of a grant partner. As a result, they look for organizations with strong leadership that can manage change, organizations with a culture of innovation, and organizations with a commitment to continuous learning and improvement. During their time as a grant partner, ANet reinforced the importance of these conditions and offered two additional traits that Centerbridge and Bain might consider when selecting future partners: (1) leaders who see themselves as change managers and who see change as mission-critical work; and (2) an organizational culture that values bold thinking as a way to use lessons learned to innovate and improve.

Leaders as Change Managers

Karn Engelsgerd, Vice President of Networks, explained that CEO Mora Segal and Romansky present change efforts and initiatives as activities that are “about our work.” She added that they define change-related activities as a way to answer the question, “what do we need to do as an organization?” as opposed to obligations or requirements to external parties. Other team members also noted the focus on organizational mission in the launch of strategies linked to the Partnership Grant.

The connection between the daily work of the organization and the new strategies was intentional. Romansky, who in close collaboration with Segal managed the Partnership Grant, weaved the proposed strategies into the fabric of the organization. His strategic position within ANet and experience as a management consultant allowed him to communicate the strategic goals of the Partnership Grant in a manner that resonated with other members of the organization. Romansky’s approach suggests that future grant partners would benefit by identifying a project leader who is well-positioned to work closely with senior leaders at the organization while building commitment and buy-in across the organization.

Bold Thinking

One of ANet’s core values is “Bold Thinking,” which describes a willingness to “seize possibilities” following “careful study and reflection and with disciplined thought.” As the “Bold Thinking” core value suggests, innovation at ANet means the organization is not hampered by potential risks, nor does it rush into opportunities. The organization’s

ability to balance risk aversion and temerity is perhaps best reflected in its approach to adjacencies, which was a decision informed by research from Bain and consultation with Centerbridge, and was made possible by the opportunity to partner with DCPS and DPS.

Following the launch of the adjacency strategy, ANet continued to study the impact of the approach by analyzing student achievement scores and educator satisfaction. It also looked for more novel ways to understand how educators engaged with the adjacency by examining how users interacted with the online portal that stores ANet’s tools and resources. Critically, these data were shared widely. The organization hosted “After Action Reviews,” events that convened broad coalitions of ANet colleagues to review data and identify next steps — a process similar to the type of coaching support ANet provides to schools and systems.

Encourage Uptake of Partnership Grant Resources

The Partnership Grant evolves with each new grant partner as Centerbridge and Bain search for better ways to support grant partners. In recent years, the grant has moved toward creating a New York-based cohort experience for its grant partners, and Centerbridge and Bain are thinking about how to support engagement with the cohort for future grant partners that, like ANet, have a New York City and a national presence. One approach Centerbridge and Bain have taken is to begin scoping projects during the selection phase. They believe earlier access to scoping resources will help ensure that projects are a strong fit for the Partnership Grant’s resources.

The Partnership Grant has also evolved to include research support from Castleman and Wyckoff at UVA. Although offered to ANet later in its grant period, Lin shared that the research and technical support she and her team received was well-timed, explaining that she would not have been able to engage in these resources earlier in the Partnership Grant period because she was still ramping up for the theory of action revisions. Lin’s take on the timing suggests that there could be a careful balance between meeting the strategic needs of nonprofits and setting them up to measure their success during the grant period. Previewing and reminding grant partners of research and technical resources may be a way to manage the tension between readiness and success.

Conclusion

During the Partnership Grant period, ANet designed and implemented strategies to support organizational growth in pursuit of its mission. Specifically, the pro bono consulting from Bain and financial support from Centerbridge aided the creation of new sales roles and the rethinking of organizational structures. Bain's consultancy coupled with thoughtful partnership from Centerbridge positioned ANet to thoughtfully pilot an adjacency with two school districts.

ANet's efforts to serve more schools and other organizational activities also clarified the need to revisit the organization's theory of action. Fortunately, during ANet's time as a grant partner, Centerbridge added funding to secure the research and technical expertise of Castleman and Wyckoff. Working with these UVA-based researchers, ANet revised its theory of action and, at the time of publication, is updating its data collection practices and forging a new research agenda.

ANet's commitment to learning and its openness to "bold thinking" is worth further consideration as Bain and Centerbridge select new grant partners. This culture of innovation and improvement, plus earlier engagement in project scoping, is likely to help grant partners better leverage the Partnership Grant resources. Well-timed research and technical expertise like that of Castleman and Wyckoff can help grant partners strengthen their methods for measuring success.

As ANet enters its final year in the grant portfolio, Segal reflected on the impact the work streams enabled by the Partnership Grant have had on the organization. She said prior to the Partnership Grant ANet, by and large, helped schools put "good data to use." Now, Segal sees the organization as offering "more of a full-cycle of instructional support" that helps educators learn "how to bring quality instruction to classrooms in a way that engag[es] students and ... help[s] them reach their full potential."

Even as the number of organizations providing services similar to ANet increases, ANet remains a trailblazer with its commitment to offering services that are tailored to specific schools and systems and with its belief that students benefit when a broad coalition of educators work together to understand standards and evidence of student learning. Yet, belief is not the only driving force behind its approach. ANet gathers evidence of its impact and responds to this evidence after careful review from its members. In doing so, ANet provides services to support teaching and learning and models what continuous improvement looks like in education.

Appendix A: Summary of Achievement Network's Services

Service	Model Description	Key Features
Coaching	ANet coaches were central to the organization's initial theory of how its services improve teaching and learning. Coaches are successful teachers and school leaders who serve as thought partners and who help bridge research-based practices with evidence of teaching and learning at the school level. They also help ANet schools access the ANet's tools, resources, and effective practices. Over the course of an academic year, ANet coaches work closely with schools to improve every stage of the teaching and learning cycle.	ANet coaching support involves at least 20 interactions between the ANet coach and school designed to: Develop systems and structures for lesson planning and data analysis, Increase the effectiveness of existing instructional practices through the use of data and understanding of standards, Build leaders' expertise with standards and data-driven practices, and Distribute leadership and provide strong development to teachers in the use of standards and data.
Assessments	ANet's rigorous assessments help schools identify what students have learned in relation to standards. Designed by a team of ANet specialists, ANet assessments provide timely, accurate information about what standards students have met and why, as well as insight into those standards students are struggling to meet. They are assessments for learning not assessments of learning.	ANet assessments are aligned to standards and revised to reflect the changing landscape of assessment practices. Schools administer four assessments in grades 2-8 in ELA and math over the course of the school year and receive their results within 48 hours via ANet's online platform.
Tools and Resources	ANet tools and resources give schools easy access to data and to the resources needed to respond to that data. Accessible via ANet's online platform "myANet," schools can download data reports and analyze student outcomes. The platform also gives schools access to instructional and assessment tools to reteach and reassess students.	"myANet" gives school leaders and teachers access to: Data reports and standards guides, Sample lessons and plans that are organized by standard, "Misconception Guides" to common student errors to better understand student thinking, and A quiz builder tool that allows teachers to design assessments that allow them to reassess student learning after reteaching.
Network	Schools have access to a diverse and experienced network of schools that are committed to improving student learning. Network members share ideas and collaborate to solve problems and improve student learning. ANet's research team also studies and shares lessons learned about what works among network partners.	The ANet network: Comprises 520 schools of which 53% are district schools and 47% are charters, Has partners working in 10 states and the District of Columbia, and Includes some of the fastest growing and top-performing districts and charter schools.
Professional Development	ANet designs and facilitates a number of professional development events. These events create a space for educators to learn and reflect with colleagues. Events are designed to foster collaboration and problem-solving.	Professional development events include: Regional conferences for school leaders, Standards spotlight events for teachers, National webinars, Learning walks to peer schools, and Other special meetings.

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