

MAY 2013

# Promising Practices in Professional Growth & Support:

## *Case Study of Aspire Public Schools*

*One of a series of ERS publications and tools on teacher Professional Growth & Support, this case study explores how one charter management network implements a strategic approach to improving teaching effectiveness at the system level. It is part of a set of four case studies of organizations with promising practices in this area.*

Four organizations with promising practices in teacher Professional Growth & Support have significantly raised outcomes for low-income students. The charter management networks, Achievement First and Aspire Public Schools, and the two reform organizations, Teach Plus and Agile Mind, have successfully increased student achievement with a sustained focus on teaching effectiveness and capacity. In this publication, we will focus on how Aspire Public Schools emphasize teacher teaming around regular student data with support from content experts and teacher leaders. In the sister case studies, we explore how Achievement First holistically integrates professional growth with key human capital and teaching support functions; how Agile Mind's Instructional Guidance Systems for math and science provide school systems with a cost-effective way to gain expertise on Common Core standards; and how Teach Plus structures an innovative teacher leader program to build the capacity of staff school-wide. All four of these organizations leverage information and technology to identify priorities for students and teachers.

As these organizations respond to the challenges of Common Core standards, invest heavily in teaching capacity through teacher leadership and collaborative planning time, and capitalize on assessment and evaluation data and technology, they exemplify best practices in Professional Growth & Support. They reinforce what Education Resource Strategies (ERS) terms the Eight Principles of a Strategic Professional Growth & Support System. The eight principles below summarize ERS research and work with partner school systems and are the foundation for ERS' white paper, *A New Vision for Teacher Professional Growth & Support: Six Steps to a More Powerful School System Strategy* and related tools.

In each case study, we describe the mission and background, strategic approaches to Professional Growth & Support, performance results, program costs, lessons learned, and next steps. The distinctive approaches, success factors, and challenges that each organization faces illustrate these principles and the steps that school systems and educational leaders can take to make the most of Professional Growth & Support activities and spending.

## **Eight Principles of a Strategic Professional Growth & Support System**

### *A strategic Professional Growth & Support system...*

1. Integrates all human capital and teaching support functions to support the school system's broader improvement strategy and context
2. Invests primarily in job-embedded teacher growth through school-based content experts, teacher leaders, and time for teacher teams
3. Links results of performance evaluations to opportunities for growth that are ongoing and occur at key career junctures
4. Supports growth throughout a teacher's career by restructuring compensation and career path
5. Organizes sufficient teacher time to meet both individual growth and organization needs
6. Differentiates investments based on school and educator needs and performance levels
7. Ensures accountability and continuous improvement by assigning responsibility and measuring impact
8. Pays for ongoing costs with sustainable funding and leverages external resources, partners, and technology to promote quality and efficiency

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## Aspire Public Schools:

### *A Model for Teacher Growth through Leadership and Teaming*

#### Overview

Aspire Public Schools has ranked as the top-performing California school system among those serving more than two-thirds or more low-income students, for the last three years. Aspire’s culture of success is built on high expectations, a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum, a sense of community, additional time for intensive student learning, and collaborative planning time for teachers. However, Aspire’s investment in the quality of its teaching force at all career stages—from the newest resident teacher to the most veteran mentor, coach, or lead teacher—provides the foundation for its success. Aspire’s career ladder not only retains the best and brightest, but also capitalizes on their expertise. As teachers grow into various leadership roles, they offer their peers both individual and team-based support to improve instruction across the system.

Aspire Public Schools’ Background	
Description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• CMO located in CA &amp; TN</li></ul>
Student Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Top-performing low-income system since 2008 based on API scores</li><li>• 100% college acceptance</li></ul>
Reach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 34 schools</li></ul>
Student Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• PreK-12</li><li>• 80% low income</li></ul>
PG & S Strategy Highlights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Multiple teacher leader roles guide growth at all career stages</li><li>• Weekly collaborative planning time</li><li>• Assessment-driven teaching</li></ul>

#### Mission & Program

The mission of Aspire Public Schools is “to open and operate small, high-quality charter schools in low-income neighborhoods, in order to: increase the academic performance of California’s diverse students, develop effective educators, catalyze change in public schools, and share successful practices with other forward-thinking educators.” Aspire was founded in 1998 with the opening of a single school in Stockton, CA. By the 2011–2012 school year, Aspire was serving over 12,000 students in 34 schools throughout California, concentrated in the Bay Area, the Central Valley, and Los Angeles. The students in these schools are 85 percent African-American and Hispanic and 80 percent low-income. Beginning in 2013, Aspire will undertake its first growth outside of California; Aspire will partner with the Achievement School District in Memphis, Tennessee, to open and operate ten public charter schools.<sup>1</sup>

## Aspire’s Distinctive Model

Aspire has a distinctive model for its schools, including an expectation of “College for Certain,” which means “providing every student with the academic knowledge and skills to ultimately be successful and graduate from college. This includes mastery of a rigorous college-prep curriculum with an emphasis on college-level writing, project-based assessments to demonstrate college-ready mastery beyond tests, and passing at least three to five college courses in order to graduate from high school.”<sup>2</sup> The curriculum combines adopted and internally developed content that spans grades K–12. Aspire schools rely on frequent formative assessments to observe student progress, track teacher growth, and inform classroom teaching. Key design features help create a sense of community: school sizes of no more than 360 grade K–5 students and no more than 400 grade 6–12 students, smaller class sizes,<sup>3</sup> and consistent advisory groups (15 students to one advisor) that meet daily from 6th grade until high school graduation.

The Charter Management Organization (CMO) has increased learning time in its schools with a longer school day and school year.<sup>4</sup> Aspire uses several strategies to organize this time to allow for teacher collaboration and intensive student learning: block scheduling with blocks of 90–120 minutes, multiple one- to two-week “intersessions” per year for exploring single topics in depth, and one “short day” per week for students (student day ends at 12:30 p.m.) to allow for staff collaboration in the afternoons.

## A Strategic Professional Growth & Support System<sup>5</sup>

Aspire Public Schools supports teacher growth on a system-wide level through frequent teacher teaming that builds knowledge collaboratively around daily instruction and a carefully designed career path that guides growth through skilled leadership. Although California’s funding cliff has limited the financial rewards for leadership, the combination of targeted raises, support for professional growth, and prestige has made Aspire’s career path, teacher leader, and teaming models viable pathways to success.

### **ERS KEY PRINCIPLE**

**Links results of performance evaluations to opportunities for growth that are ongoing and occur at key career junctures**

Aspire leadership hopes to retain teachers for the duration of their careers, and has therefore outlined a teacher trajectory to support teachers differently at each stage of their career, ranging from a residency program for teachers-in-training to multiple leadership roles for experienced teachers to stay in the classroom but do more sophisticated work. (Detail on each step of the full career ladder is included in the **Appendix**, page 9.) Aspire holds teachers to clear standards and expectations. Career progress is based solely on individual performance and whether teachers can meet the criteria outlined for each additional role. At many points on the career ladder, Aspire leverages the experience of senior teachers to support and coach the novice teachers. This results in professional growth for teachers of all levels; novice teachers are able to learn from the best teachers in the Aspire system, while the

experienced teachers have opportunities to take on additional responsibilities and receive financial and intangible rewards for doing so. The collaborative nature of Aspire’s approach, in which teachers coach and learn from one another, is critical to raising the bar for all teachers regardless of skill and capacity. “Our success has come from being a collaborative environment,” emphasizes Heather Kirkpatrick, VP of Education at Aspire.

#### ERS KEY PRINCIPLE

**Invests primarily in job-embedded teacher growth through school-based content experts, teacher leaders, and time for teacher teams**

Aspire’s longer school year, “short day,” and other scheduling features allow significant time for teacher leaders and content experts to support teachers both individually and in grade and subject-based teams. The career ladder allows for a variety of leadership positions. For the purposes of this case, we will focus on three types of school-based content experts—Induction Coaches, Lead Teachers, and Mentor Teachers. (Detail on all roles in the **Appendix**, page 9.)

*Induction Coaches.* The first two years of an Aspire teacher’s tenure are called “induction,” and at the end of this period, teachers earn their California Clear Teacher Credential if they comply with state standards. During this time, each teacher is coached in a one-on-one manner by induction coaches. The coach role is strictly formative (and not at all evaluative); coaches help induction teachers to reflect and grow as a teacher over the two years. About half of induction teachers are served by full-time induction coaches (~20 FTEs in the Aspire system), each with a portfolio of no more than four schools. The other half of induction teachers are coached by seasoned teachers who have qualified to take on the induction coach role. There are about 80 such teachers in the Aspire system, and each is assigned to coach an induction teacher at his/her same school. For these on-site coaches, the coaching primarily occurs during the afternoon of the weekly “short day.”

One technique utilized by some induction coaches is a real-time coaching method in which the coach sits in the back of the induction teacher’s classroom wearing a headset and the induction teacher wears an earpiece to enable him/her to hear the coach. Aspire has defined short (one- or two-word) cues to direct a teacher to use a certain strategy, such as “cold call” or “narrate.” If done well, this process can help a novice teacher to develop a sense of timing—to understand when a strategy for classroom management will be effective. The coach, who will have met with the induction teacher in advance to understand the goals for the class, provides an experienced set of eyes in the back of the classroom and can quickly draw the newer teacher’s attention to a certain issue or provide direction on how to cope with a tricky situation. Aspire does not mandate this strategy and Aspire leadership estimates that about half of coaches use this approach.

*Lead Teachers.* Each Aspire school has four or five Lead Teachers, each of whom leads a team of teachers that is organized by grade (at elementary levels) or subject (at secondary levels). They are responsible for the support of their team through “ILEAD” activities (see inset next page), but also teach a full course load in addition to these Lead Teacher responsibilities. During the afternoon of the

weekly “short days,” Lead Teachers facilitate analysis and discussion of student performance data in order to identify learning gaps, plan interventions, and adjust content and instruction. This job-embedded support around daily teaching challenges is a key part of teacher growth. Aspire supports Lead Teachers through weekly meetings with principals and specialized training—via New Lead Teacher Bootcamp, the Aspire-wide summer leadership retreat, a regional leadership winter retreat, and other opportunities.

***Mentors Teachers:*** Each resident teacher in the Aspire residency program is matched with a mentor teacher, each of whom has met strict criteria around student achievement, principal assessment, and colleague assessments. Resident teachers, just entering the profession without experience or teaching credentials, work closely with these mentor teachers; they spend four days per week in the mentor teacher’s classroom and take over the class at various points during the year. As Heather Kirkpatrick, VP of Education at Aspire, explains, “The vision is that we’re replicating what our best teachers do across the system.”

Importantly, Aspire’s coaching and teaming structure is supported by a real-time information system. Aspire is able to increase teacher impact and effectiveness by immediately linking the results of ongoing student assessments with coaching feedback and evaluation. Teachers and teacher leaders use customized reports to identify areas for intervention, inform collaborative planning, and access professional development tools in an integrated system.<sup>6</sup>

**ERS KEY PRINCIPLE**

**Supports growth throughout a teacher’s career by restructuring compensation and career path**

Aspire provides financial and intangible incentives to encourage and reward teachers for taking on additional roles and responsibilities outlined in the career ladder (see full detail of career ladder in the **Appendix**, page 9). For example, for the additional roles outlined above, incentives are as follows:

Lead Teacher “ILEAD” Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Instructional Guidelines:</b> Use and model the instructional guidelines (a set of instructional best practices)</li> <li>• <b>Lesson Plan:</b> Plan, give feedback, and observe team’s lessons</li> <li>• <b>Emotional Bank Account:</b> Build relationships with team members</li> <li>• <b>Academic Meetings:</b> Plan meetings that focus on problem solving</li> <li>• <b>Data:</b> Run cycles of inquiry and facilitate data talks</li> </ul>

Role	Financial Incentives	Intangible Incentives
Induction Coach	\$1,000 stipend per teacher coached	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training (general coaching strategies as well as specific to state standards, differentiation, English learners, special populations and equity)</li> </ul>
Lead Teacher	\$2,500 stipend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extra free period (in some cases)</li> <li>• Role on school’s Leadership Team</li> </ul>
Mentor Teacher (for resident)	\$3,000 stipend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• n/a</li> </ul>

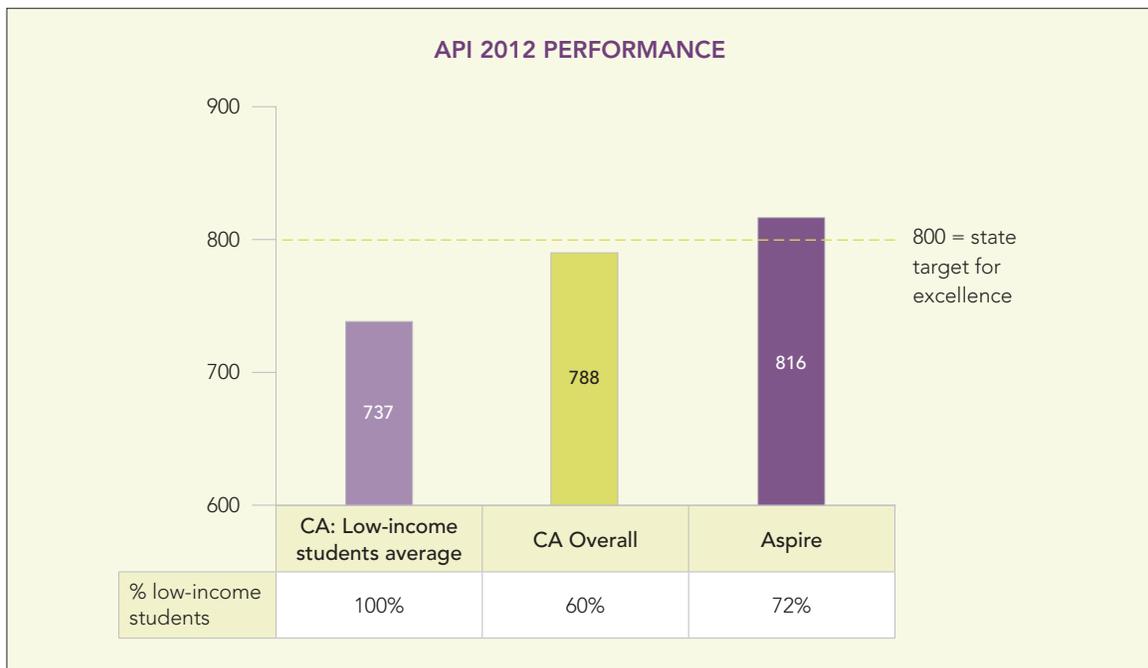
In addition to the intangible incentives that are specific to some roles, Aspire has a culture in which there is prestige associated with assuming these roles. This is especially important when tight budgets in California limit the size of stipends. Applicants must meet strict criteria. Kirkpatrick explains, “Each role is a new challenge and a stepping stone—a move up.”

Aspire funds each of these investments in teachers differently. The residency program (including stipends for mentor teachers) is currently funded with grant dollars, but Aspire hopes to find more sustainable funding sources in coming years, as they collect data on the efficacy of the program. Induction coaches are funded in part (50 percent of costs) by the State of California, and the Aspire home office raises funds for the other half. Lead Teacher stipends are included in each school site budget.

### Results<sup>7</sup>

Among large school systems serving two-thirds or more low-income students, Aspire ranked as the top-performing system in California; in 2011–2012 for the third year in a row.<sup>8</sup> The average API score for Aspire schools is 816 (with the state’s “Target for Excellence” being >800), which surpasses the average API for California overall and for the subset of California low-income students. (See chart below for detail.)

Given the “College for Certain” emphasis, Aspire closely tracks college metrics of its students. In each of the past three years (2010, 2011, and 2012), 100 percent of graduating seniors were accepted into a four-year college or university. And since Aspire’s founding in 1998, the overall college persistence rate is 87 percent.



## Lessons Learned

Despite the current fiscal crisis, Aspire has grown and evolved, specifically in regards to building and supporting teacher capacity. Although Aspire has had to hold teacher salaries static in the past few years due to state budget cuts, the CMO has continued to invest in teachers via coaching, extra stipends for extra responsibilities, and other opportunities for growth and progress. For many teachers, this is a worthwhile trade-off—these investments compensate for limited financial rewards.

Aspire has developed an accountability structure that gauges the effectiveness of different professional development and coaching efforts, holding staff accountable for successful implementation and delivery. Kirkpatrick points out that a teacher feedback loop is also “really helpful and a huge part of our success.” She explains that there is a robust feedback system for all elements of the teacher support structure: teachers provide feedback after every professional growth opportunity, teachers give feedback on coaches twice per year. Kirkpatrick states, “We learn all the time that we didn’t get something right and we’re constantly revising as a result. The feedback loop is a critical piece of why things work: we get rid of some things and improve others.” This openness to change and spirit of ongoing improvement pervades the charter management organization as each teacher, coach, mentor, or system leader strives to increase their contribution to effective teaching and learning.

## Sources

- ERS interview with Heather Kirkpatrick, VP of Education, at Aspire Public Schools, December 2012.
- Aspire website. [www.aspirepublicschools.org](http://www.aspirepublicschools.org)
- School Turnaround Group. [www.turnaroundzone.org](http://www.turnaroundzone.org)
- Social Impact Exchange. [www.socialimpactexchange.org](http://www.socialimpactexchange.org)

**APPENDIX: CURRENT ASPIRE TEACHER LEADER CAREER PATH**

An educator rated “Entering” will be eligible for the following roles:		
	Resident Teacher	Induction Candidate
Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entering Teacher</li> <li>• College graduate</li> <li>• GPA of 3.0</li> <li>• Solid recommendations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entering or Emerging Teacher</li> <li>• A California Preliminary Teacher Credential</li> <li>• In first two years of teaching on that credential</li> </ul>
Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training and compensation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training only</li> </ul>
Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work side by side with a Mentor Teacher four days/week to teach a class for one academic year</li> <li>• Attend seminar once/week all year</li> <li>• Take courses online, complete additional readings and assignments beyond these five work days</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work one on one with an Aspire Instructional coach to reflect and grow as a teacher over two years</li> <li>• Ensure that your Collection of Evidence at the end of each of the two years shows evidence that you meet the state standards to earn your California Clear Teacher Credential</li> </ul>
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likelihood of a full-time teaching job with an Aspire Public School if complete the Residency successfully</li> <li>• Stipend of \$13,500 plus benefits for the year</li> <li>• Graduate with a master’s degree from the University of the Pacific</li> <li>• Earn your California Preliminary Teacher Credential</li> <li>• Work with one of the top-performing teachers in the organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1:1 support from an Aspire Induction Coach for two years</li> <li>• Earn your California Clear Teacher Credential</li> </ul>

**Endnotes**

- 1 In Memphis, Aspire will transform ten existing schools with poor academic achievement—a new approach for Aspire, which has only opened new schools in CA.
- 2 <http://turnaroundzone.org/2012/10/10/pursuing-college-for-certain/>
- 3 Given budget cuts in recent years, Aspire class sizes have increased, but are still smaller than those in LAUSD.
- 4 Aspire schools have about one hour more instruction each day than students in traditional California public schools and provide 190 days of instruction, ten days more than traditional public schools.
- 5 The key components of Aspire’s teacher Professional Growth & Support are organized according to *Principles of Strategic Professional Growth & Support Systems* and can be found in the Introduction. With generous funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Education Resource Strategies (ERS) has derived these principles through extensive research and analysis of the strategies and spending of several partner districts. For more information on the principles and the analysis, see Education Resource Strategies (2013). *A New Vision for Teacher Professional Growth & Support: Six Challenging Steps to a More Powerful School System Strategy* Watertown, MA.
- 6 <http://www.socialimpactexchange.org/sites/www.socialimpactexchange.org/files/Aspire%27s%20Success%20Story.pdf>
- 7 [www.aspirepublicschools.org](http://www.aspirepublicschools.org)
- 8 API refers to the Academic Performance Index: The cornerstone of California’s *Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999*; measures the academic performance and growth of schools on a variety of academic measures.

## Acknowledgements

*We would like to recognize the contributions of ERS team members Barbara Christiansen and Anna Sommers for the work related to these case studies. We are indebted to the leaders of the profiled organizations for sharing significant time and information for our data gathering and verification. These individuals include:*

**Aspire:** *Heather Kirkpatrick, VP of Education*

**Teach Plus:** *Monique Burns Thompson, President; Celine Coggins, Founder and CEO; Meghan O'Keefe, National Director of T3 Initiative; Nathan Pelsma, Director of Finance and Operations*

**Achievement First:** *Paige MacLean, Senior Director, Strategic Partnerships; Kurtis Indorf, Senior Director, Program Strategy and Design; Sara Keenan, VP, Leadership Development; Amber McKay, Senior Director, Data Strategy; Sarah Coon, Senior Director, Teacher Career Pathways; and Tracy Epp, Chief Academic Officer*

**Agile Mind:** *Linda Chaput, Founder and CEO; Massie McAdoo; David Savage, VP and National Director of Professional Services; Gregg McFarland, President of Agile Initiatives; Stephanie Surlles, Senior Program Manager for Strategic Development*

*We are grateful to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for providing funding for this project and guidance from Sarah Buhayar and Mike Copland. ERS is solely responsible for any ideas presented in this paper and for any errors.*



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