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Dr. David Smith  
Superintendent  
EVSC

## Evansville: A proactive approach to improvement

*The story behind the Indiana State Board of Education's recent decision*

By Charis Anderson

The Indiana State Board of Education has not been shy about exercising its authority to intervene in chronically underperforming schools. Under the state's Public Law 221, the Indiana Board can mandate specific interventions for any school that has received six consecutive failing grades under the state's accountability system – up to a complete takeover by the state.

And for the first eight schools that hit that mark since the state started counting in 2005, the board exercised its authority every time.

Until Glenwood Leadership Academy, that is.

Glenwood Leadership Academy (GLA), a K-8 school in the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation (EVSC), received its sixth “F” at the end of the 2012-2013 school year, triggering the review process by the State Board of Education.

Fortunately, the district had already decided to take matters into its own hands. Earlier that school year EVSC decided to preempt state intervention and partner with Mass Insight Education to reinvent the way it serves GLA and other chronically underperforming schools.

“We recognized that several of EVSC's schools, including GLA, were not meeting the needs of their students despite a number of initiatives that had been implemented over the years. We realized we needed to try a

new approach in order to dramatically improve student outcomes. So in 2012, we proactively partnered with Mass Insight Education to provide more support for GLA as well as to develop strategies that could be rolled out district-wide to help all students in the EVSC,” said Dr. David Smith, EVSC school superintendent.

“The Indiana Department of Education has supported those efforts since they were first launched, and we're thrilled the State Board of Education has recognized the impact they're already having on the students at GLA.”

In March, the Indiana State Board of Education approved the district's self-imposed intervention – an unprecedented ruling that was an explicit endorsement of the innovative and proactive approach taken by EVSC in implementing bold and swift interventions across a cluster of the district's chronically underperforming schools.

Students from Glenwood Leadership Academy receive their free backpacks filled with supplies at the Back to School Blitz.

## THE CONTEXT

EVSC is no stranger to innovative reform efforts. In 2009, in an effort to improve outcomes and conditions for EVSC students, district and union leadership worked together to develop the EQUITY Framework, which gives participating schools greater autonomy over things such as schedule, school calendars and professional development.

The EQUITY Framework was piloted at three district schools – Delaware, McGary and Evans – at the start of the 2010-2011 school year. By the end of that first year, Delaware's scores on the state standardized test had shot up by 16 percentage points, and the school was recognized for having the biggest gains in the state. Three years after the EQUITY Model

was introduced, scores at all three schools had improved across the board.

Despite the progress, however, district leadership wasn't satisfied. Results varied across the three schools, and EVSC had difficulty replicating what was working at the EQUITY schools, as the district was not systemically aligned with the three unique school-based improvement endeavors. EVSC had been consistently graded at or near the bottom of the state accountability system since it was introduced in 2005, and by 2012, several of the district's schools were potentially in line for state intervention under Public Law 221. Additionally, the district was struggling to meet the needs of its high-poverty students, who lagged behind the district on ISTEP performance and even



farther behind state averages.

The success of the EQUITY schools demonstrated what was possible – so the challenge facing EVSC in 2012 was how to expand that initial success to reach even more of the district's students.

Enter Mass Insight Education, a Boston-based nonprofit committed to working with districts to develop replicable, sustainable, and scalable solutions to turn around the performance of underperforming schools and to transform districts into high-performing organizations. The alignment between Mass Insight's mission and EVSC's vision for what the district could be laid the foundation for a seamless, effective partnership.

"We believed EVSC was the most well-positioned school corporation in the state of Indiana to take on this work," said Justin Cohen, president of Mass Insight Education, reflecting on the start of Mass Insight's partnership with EVSC.

"One of the main things we look for in a partner is evidence that the leadership is willing to be bold and take risks. With innovations such as the EQUITY Framework and the district's commitment to use data already in place, EVSC had already demonstrated a commitment to making hard decisions in the best interests of children."

Both EVSC and Mass Insight believed that they could design and

implement a strategy that built upon the EQUITY Framework in order to accelerate student achievement gains across the school corporation.

the Zone. The principals of the Zone schools report directly to Hillyard, creating a direct line of communication through Hillyard from the schools to

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#### THE WORK

Within weeks of formalizing the partnership with Mass Insight, EVSC and Mass Insight created an independent unit, the Office of Transformational Support (OTS), to oversee five of the district's schools, including Glenwood Leadership Academy, in what would be known as the Transformation Zone. The schools in the Zone were the district's most chronically underperforming schools.

Carrie Hillyard, an experienced, innovative, and motivated school leader, was chosen to head up the new office as the director of school transformation, overseeing two transformation strategist positions as well as all five schools in

the superintendent.

"I was very eager to have the opportunity to lead our district's school transformation efforts," said Hillyard. "As a district-level administrator, I was driven by the intensive and unique needs of our most chronically low-performing schools.

"Traditional district-level systems and personnel lack the ability to be swift and nimble in the execution of results-driven support strategies that target drastic improvement efforts. Superintendent Smith envisioned an internal team that would awaken our district from a traditional mindset while problem-solving our way through aged barriers to school improvement.

“Mass Insight’s support of this work has been critical as they continue to challenge our thinking and guide us in next steps.”

The Office of Transformational Support is unlike any other division within EVSC. As a “lead partner” to the schools, it has a performance-based contract with the superintendent that clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities for both the office and EVSC in the joint management and oversight

had to apply for the job through a competency-based selection process that was designed to identify the teachers best equipped to meet the diverse needs of students in the Zone schools and achieve excellent results. Teachers had to attend and pass a professional development academy that was based upon Doug Lemov’s “Teach like a Champion.”

The re-staffing process was done in collaboration with union leader-

based selection process that included the professional development academy, the five Zone schools hired 70 new teachers prior to the 2013-2014 school year, resulting in up to 50 percent new staff at each Zone school.

“The feedback we received from teachers who went through the Zone Team Training was overwhelmingly positive,” said Shannon Strieter, senior transformation strategist for the Office of Transformational Support. “They appreciated that the ‘Teach like a Champion’ techniques were practical and met the needs of the students in their classrooms. During the days following the first round of the Zone Team Training, principals noted immediate implementation of techniques into instruction during their walkthroughs.”

Strieter continued: “From the Zone leadership perspective, it was clear that the time, energy, and focus this group of teachers had devoted to the initial Zone Team Training as well as subsequent training for new hires helped build an even stronger commitment to the goals and vision we are trying to achieve in the Zone schools. In a follow-up survey after the initial Zone Team Training, teachers overwhelmingly expressed their desire to continue to learn additional ‘Teach like a Champion’ techniques.”

In August 2013, with new staff in place, the Zone schools opened for the school year with incredible

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Carrie Hillyard  
Director of School Transformation  
Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation

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of Glenwood Leadership Academy and the other Zone schools. It sets clear goals and expectations for improvement in the Zone schools.

One of the first major interventions that the district and Mass Insight worked on together was the development of a talent strategy for the Zone schools. Any teacher who wanted to remain at a Zone school or who was interested in coming to a Zone school

ship. Both Hillyard and teachers’ union leadership evaluated teacher performance in the professional development academy and worked together to reach a consensus on the successful completion of teachers who chose to attend the training.

With support and direction from the Office of Transformational Support in recruiting qualified candidates and executing a rigorous, competency-



## EVSC by the NUMBERS

<b>22,986</b>	Students in grades PK-12
<b>59%</b>	Qualify for free and reduced lunch
<b>1,419</b>	Teachers
<b>39</b>	Schools
<b>5</b>	Number of schools in the Transformation Zone
<b>\$226.5mm</b>	FY13 approved budget



excitement and high expectations for the work that lay ahead. Over the past year, Mass Insight has also worked with the OTS to design and implement a Zone-specific performance monitoring system to track performance against planned goals and objectives and to ensure that improvement strategies are being implemented consistently and with fidelity. The data from this system helps Zone and school leadership rapidly adjust strategies and actions in response to performance metrics on an ongoing basis.

The new system, along with an improved strategic school improvement planning process and the Office of Transformational Support's performance agreement, has helped build increased clarity and alignment around goals and expectations.

### THE RESULTS

In just the first year of implementation

after a year of planning, EVSC is already seeing early signs of progress. Under the state's accountability system in 2013, the district rose one full point on a four-point scale – from a "D" to a "C" – the largest gain of any district in the state. EVSC was one of the state's highest performing urban districts after the 2012-13 school year and made the largest gains in student growth.

While Glenwood Leadership Academy and the other Zone schools are still completing their first year of implementation under the Office of Transformational Support, there are leading indicators that suggest that the schools are on the right trajectory and that the interventions are already beginning to have a positive effect on student performance. On assessments predictive of Indiana's state accountability measure, the Zone schools made larger gains than other similar schools in the corporation.

At GLA, on weekly formative assessments, students have been consistently performing well above the reach goal set for the Transformation Zone since mid-October. On an exam that predicts performance on state tests, students tested above the school's 2013 performance. The climate at the school has improved as well, with the number of disciplinary incidents dropping dramatically and teacher attendance improving.

The most recent sign of progress was the stunning performance of GLA's third graders on a state reading test: the school saw its pass rate shoot up by 15.8 percentage points, the largest increase of any school in the district. Two-thirds of the GLA's third graders passed the test, which is required for promotion to the fourth grade.

Some of this data was presented during a public hearing in December 2013 on the future status of GLA



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under Indiana’s Public Law 221 – and the state took notice. In March, the Indiana State Board of Education ruled that the interventions developed by EVSC and Mass Insight were “effective” and should be allowed to continue.

This marked the first time the Indiana State Board of Education declined either to take over a chronically underperforming school or to mandate the district take some other action. Across Indiana, eight other schools have reached this point: five were taken over by the state, and three were assigned an external lead partner to provide additional supports and guidance. Only GLA has been allowed to continue with its existing, district-designed school improvement efforts.

“The decision by the State Board of Education is a clear vote of support for the collaborative, proactive improvement strategy launched by EVSC leadership in 2012,” said Cohen, Mass Insight’s president. “It recognizes the good work that is already happening on the ground. That said, we still have a lot of work to do, and if our efforts do not ultimately result in dramatically better outcomes for children in the

long term, we will be the first to admit that our efforts were not successful.”

### THE FUTURE

As critical as the recent State Board of Education decision is for the near-term work at Glenwood Leadership Academy, EVSC leadership and Mass Insight both recognize that what is ultimately most important is whether GLA, the Zone, and the corporation as a whole are able to achieve significant and sustained improvement for their students.

The work done in the Zone is paving the way for how systems for support and accountability can work together to improve outcomes for kids. These initial reform efforts are creating a roadmap as part of the continuous improvement planning process.

The leading indicators suggest that Glenwood Leadership Academy and EVSC are on the right track, but there needs to be continuous and sustained focus both on improving results for students and on monitoring progress against the corporation’s goals and objectives.



“It has been **rewarding** to see the **PROGRESS** and increasing **SUCCESS** of *our students* thus far, and we know with our continued focused **efforts** and **supports**, those **results** will continue to **climb**.”

Dr. David Smith  
Superintendent, EVSC



“It has been rewarding to see the progress and increasing success of our students thus far; and we know with our continued focused efforts and

supports, those results will continue to climb,” Smith said. “The work with Mass Insight has helped shape the support we offer schools, which will ultimately

lead to a better educational experience for EVSC’s students.”

Mass Insight Education, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in Boston, Mass. was founded in 1997. Its launch reflected the high priority that business, government, and education leaders placed at that time on the success of Massachusetts' nascent standards-based reform drive, set in motion by the passage of the Education Reform Act of 1993. It is the sister organization of Mass Insight Global Partnerships, which has worked since 1989 to keep Massachusetts and its businesses and institutions globally competitive. Mass Insight Education focuses on strategies to transform public schools into high performance organizations and to close the achievement gaps.