



Academy for Urban School Leadership

Rethinking High School Turnarounds

By Betsy Doyle and Nithin Iyengar

In June 2012, Green Dot Public Schools and The Bridgespan Group convened a small group of education leaders focused on high school turnaround and transformation. This article explores some of what we learned about problems of practice and potential solutions—all toward the ultimate goal of college and career readiness for every student. The content of this article previously appeared as a series of blog entries on Mass Insight Education’s blog, [“In the Zone.”](#)

Five years ago, Locke High School in the Watts area of South Los Angeles was one of the lowest-performing schools in California. Of the 1,000 freshmen who entered in the fall of 2004, 250 graduated and only 50 enrolled in college. In 2008, [Green Dot Public Schools](#), a Los Angeles-based charter school organization known for creating high-performing, college-prep high schools, worked with community leaders and Locke staff to successfully petition Los Angeles Unified School District to cede control of the school.

Four years into Green Dot’s turnaround effort at Locke, the first full cohort of 9th graders graduated in June 2012. Compared to peer schools across South Los Angeles, students at Locke today are 1.5 times more likely to graduate and 3.7 times more likely to complete coursework that prepares them for college. Sixty percent of the 2012 graduates were accepted to college.

This is a real achievement, and the Locke community has much to be proud of. “But here’s what keeps us up at night,” reflected Green Dot’s CEO Marco Petruzzi. “The gains we have made are the result of tremendous hard work, yet we’re still not preparing every student to graduate college and career ready.”

It’s a concern that worries educators in failing high schools coast to coast. As a nation, too many of our high schools are not preparing students to succeed. Results from the 2012 ACT showed that only 25 percent of the class of 2016 demonstrated proficiency in all four subjects the test assesses: English, math, reading, and science. An equal percentage failed to demonstrate proficiency in any of the four subjects.¹ Many chronically failing high schools, such as Locke in 2008, fare far worse with less than 5 percent of students graduating ready for college. Yet, without a vocational

¹ *ACT Profile Report—National: Graduating Class 2012*, available at www.act.org/readiness/2012.

credential or a college degree, low-income students have little chance of breaking cycles of intergenerational poverty and transforming their futures.²

With this challenge in mind, Green Dot and Bridgespan convened a small group of education leaders in June 2012 for a conversation focused on turnaround and transformation of chronically low-performing high schools. The session included charter networks such as [KIPP](#) and [Aspire Public Schools](#) as well as groups such as the [Academy for Urban School Leadership \(AUSL\)](#), [New Visions for Public Schools](#), and [Tennessee’s Achievement School District \(ASD\)](#). The goal was to create an informal space to share problems of practice and work together on solutions—all toward the ultimate goal of college and career readiness for every student.

The event confirmed that positive change is possible, but it takes sustained effort from dedicated school leaders, teachers, and parents. The examples that follow demonstrate central elements for any turnaround effort to improve college- and career-ready outcomes for students: setting high expectations for all students, particularly those in chronically failing schools; developing and supporting highly effective turnaround teachers so that they remain in the schools where they are needed most; and transforming low-performing elementary and middle schools to improve high school outcomes. While the focus of the convening was on high school transformation, it’s worth noting that all three examples speak to a common theme—successful turnaround of failing high schools will require coordinated efforts with students and teachers across the full K-12 system.

² *The Basic Economic Security Tables for the United States, A Project of Wider Opportunities For Women’s Family Economic Security Program, 2010*

Philanthropists Discuss Education

“[Conversations with Remarkable Givers](#)” is a ground-breaking video collection drawn from more than 50 original, private interviews with philanthropists and foundation leaders. Below we share links to conversations with philanthropists on education reform and teacher effectiveness.

Barbara and Pitt Hyde, Hyde Family Foundations, Autozone

- **Tipping point:** At a key moment in Tennessee education reform, Barbara and Pitt Hyde double their investment
- **Not so fast:** Barbara and Pitt Hyde say recent breakthroughs in Tennessee’s education were years in the making
- **Quality, not quantity:** Barbara and Pitt Hyde start with a few good schools

Melinda Gates, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

- **Adapting philanthropic strategy:** Melinda Gates learns that it’s not the school size—it’s the teacher

Pursuing “College for Certain”

Everyone at the convening agreed that college and career readiness for every student is a great goal, but each struggled to define what the pursuit of this goal really looks like in action.

Aspire Public Schools’ mission is to operate small, high-quality public charter schools in low-income neighborhoods throughout California. It is committed to providing a “College for Certain” education to every student. Founded in 1998, Aspire currently serves 12,000 students in a network of 34 K-12 schools. Its students are 85 percent Black and Latino, 80 percent low-income, and most will be the first from their families to attend college.

Beginning in the fall of 2013, Aspire will bring its model to Memphis, where it has been invited by Tennessee’s ASD to transform 10 existing schools whose poor academic achievement scores place them in the bottom 5 percent of schools in Tennessee.

The ASD was created as part of the state’s winning Race to the Top application for federal funds to spur educational reforms. The ASD aims to catapult the lowest ranked Tennessee schools to the top 25 percent within five years.

What has Aspire learned in its work to date that prepares it for what lies ahead in Memphis?

Aspire’s expectation of “College for Certain” means providing every student with the academic knowledge and skills to succeed in 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 three to five college courses to graduate from high school.

“Our students have few examples of anyone who’s gone to college. But now you’ve passed a college class, you now know you can do college,” explained Amy Fowler, senior director of secondary and student programs. That said, Aspire also understands that academic readiness is only one part of the college ready equation. Aspire further prepares its students by creating an on-campus support network for nurturing college-ready skills such as perseverance and tenacity, finding a college that is a good fit, overcoming hurdles such as the PSAT/SAT, and filling out scholarship and financial aid applications.

The organization has much to be proud of. For the past three years, 100 percent of its graduating seniors were accepted into a four-year college or university. Since its founding, Aspire has graduated approximately 95 percent of its students, and at least 97 percent of its graduates have applied and been accepted to a four-year institution.

Delivering these college-ready results for all students remains a real challenge. “We continue to struggle when students are far below grade-level entering high school,” said Fowler. “Our rigorous course of study leaves little room for remediation, and we risk watering-down standards if we don’t provide additional supports.”

Fowler has put her finger squarely on a dilemma shared by many educators. We must not waiver in the commitment to college and career readiness for all students, particularly those facing significant socioeconomic barriers to success. This leads us to reimagine the work of high school transformation as an effort that requires a commitment over the long-haul and begins long before students enter 9th grade.

A “Second Wind” for Turnaround Teachers

For the education leaders who gathered in June, developing and sustaining teacher talent topped their must-do list. They agreed that the job of a turnaround teacher is a daunting one and, in order to deliver college- and career-ready outcomes, it requires a commitment beyond a couple of years. However, in turnarounds, retention beyond two to three years is an urgent challenge. Increased demand for experienced turnaround teachers often exceeds the available supply. So what might it look like to build a sustainable pipeline of great turnaround teachers?

In Chicago, Mayor Rahm Emanuel turned last fall to the AUSL, which has developed and refined over the past decade an innovative school transformation model to improve student achievement in the city’s high-poverty, chronically failing schools. The model is built on a foundation of specially trained teachers. Every year since its first turnaround school in 2006, average achievement gains in AUSL elementary schools have more than doubled compared to those found elsewhere in the Chicago Public Schools. Based on that track record, Emanuel asked AUSL to double the number of teachers in its Chicago Teacher Residency program to 180 and to take on six additional K-8 turnarounds.

AUSL’s teacher residency provides a full year of preparation in a “training academy” classroom, under the guidance of an experienced mentor teacher. After their residency year, most graduates go on to form the nucleus of the faculty at new turnaround schools. Today the network includes seven training academies and 18 turnaround schools. A dramatic increase in the number of resident teachers requires an equally dramatic increase in the number of mentors.

In responding to this growth opportunity, AUSL for the first time recruited its own graduates to serve as mentors—an important milestone for an organization committed to both teacher development and school turnaround. AUSL looked across its network and identified 94 home-grown teachers who had been in

classrooms for at least three years and met a set of selection criteria, including the teacher's performance on the nationally recognized Danielson observation framework. Over six months, these teachers were trained to become mentors, and in the fall of 2012 each was paired with two new residents.

Early feedback from residents suggests that the chance to partner with graduates of the program is highly motivating. Mentors also have benefited from the program. Many remembered from their training days what it was like not to get enough coaching or to fully understand what a mentor was asking them to do. A solution emerged that has moved mentors toward more involvement with their teachers-in-training. Rather than sitting in the back of the classroom with a notepad and providing feedback later, mentors now jump right in, for example, co-teaching for a few minutes to demonstrate an instructional strategy. "We're moving toward a personal trainer relationship between the resident and mentor," explained Michael Whitmore, AUSL's Director of the Chicago Teacher Residency. "The mentor is right in the action, giving feedback in the moment. They've really taken to this."

Unlike other talent placement models, where teacher turnover after two or three years is common, AUSL believes achieving college- and career-ready outcomes in turnaround schools requires teachers committed for the longer haul. For resident mentors, the chance to coach new colleagues and work in teams "has been an infusion of energy," noted Whitmore. "They're having their second wind."

Turning Around High Schools, One Elementary School at a Time

For educators committed to turnarounds, the stark reality is that a significant percentage of students in failing high schools enter 9th grade far below grade level. While college and career readiness is the ultimate goal, day to day it can feel incredibly daunting to make progress when students are spending much of their time in remedial classes.

This topic weighed heavily on the turnaround educators who assembled last summer. Several quickly identified the need to move the conversation beyond high schools and into how to improve the elementary and middle schools downstream from the high schools.

In Tennessee, 69 of the 85 schools in the bottom 5 percent statewide are located in Memphis, where the ASD saw an opportunity to think differently about high school turnaround. According to Chief Talent Officer Ash Solar, "We believe that failing high schools are not failing schools in isolation but the result of a failed K-12 experience. In Memphis, this proved to be the case."

For example, Frayser, a neighborhood in north Memphis, is one of the city's most economically hard-hit communities and home to some of the lowest-performing schools in the state. Of the 14 schools in the Frayser cluster, 11 are in the state's bottom 5 percent. In other words, if nothing changed, almost every child in the Frayser neighborhood was certain to attend one of the lowest performing schools in the state.

In response to this crisis, the ASD decided to focus on improving the schools clustered in K-12 feeder patterns with the goal of providing families with great schools at every grade level. (The ASD both runs schools and approves charter operators, such as Aspire.) "The best way to start to turnaround a high school is to have 9th graders arriving ready for 9th grade," said Solar. "We want our students to spend high school preparing for rigorous, challenging work in college."

The ASD currently operates two elementary and one middle school in the Frayser area and will add two more elementary schools next fall. The goal is to prepare students to enter high school on track to graduate and aim for college admission.

Though the first results will not be available until this summer, the early buzz among parents has been encouraging. Elliot Smalley, ASD's chief of staff, noted, "One of the major concerns coming out of parent night was when were we going to ramp up to Advanced Placement classes. It's a great concern to have."

The ASD plans to open its first turnaround high schools soon—while scaling rapidly from six schools to 35—so that its work in elementary and middle schools creates a pipeline of students ready for 9th grade. The ASD is hopeful that its efforts to transform feeder elementary and middle schools will provide high school transformation efforts with a much needed head start.

Summary Reflections

These promising practices suggest that delivering a brighter future for students at chronically low-performing high schools is possible. But it means rethinking our approach to high school turnaround in several ways.

First, we must set a high standard for all high schools. As a country, we're making considerable progress in defining fewer, clearer, and higher standards for college and career readiness. Yet success is often couched in terms such as "increased student achievement" or "adequate yearly progress," which often represent a lower bar. We need to have college- and career-ready expectations for every student, regardless of the school that he or she attends. And we need to recognize that this will likely require doing the work of high school transformation very differently.

Second, we must develop excellent teachers and leaders committed to school transformation for the long-haul and keep the ones we already have. Today, the model for staffing high school transformation is often to find the most effective teachers and leaders and ask them to do heroic work. But these candidates are in short supply and both novices and the more experienced struggle in transformation settings without training and support. Burnout is high. We need to improve pipelines to attract and prepare teachers for the particular challenges of this work. We also need to create space for teacher-led, collaborative learning, and invest in supports and incentives that empower great teachers and leaders to stay in the schools where they are needed most.

Finally, we must consider students' K-12 experiences, not just their four-year high school experience. Most failing high schools have a large percentage of students arriving multiple grade levels behind. This often creates unrealistic expectations about the ability to achieve college and career readiness within four years of high school. We need to improve the quality of elementary and middle schools that feed into underperforming high schools and build stronger bridges between high schools and post-secondary institutions.

The issues we've discussed here are not exclusive to the nation's lowest performing high schools, but the stakes in these schools are increasingly high. As Paul Castro of KIPP Houston said during the convening, "In many neighborhoods, these chronically low-performing high schools represent a last community outpost. The livelihood of these communities depends on improving these high schools."

That's a promise worth keeping.

Acknowledgements

We'd like to thank the following for their contributions to this article: Justin Cohen and Alison Segal (School Turnaround Group at Mass Insight Education); Marco Petruzzi and Nithya Rajan (Green Dot Public Schools); Paul Castro (KIPP Houston); Amy Fowler (Aspire Public Schools); Brian Sims and Michael Whitmore (AUSL); and Elliot Smalley and Ash Solar (Tennessee's Achievement School District).