

Doing the Impossible: Making Urban Schools Excellent

by

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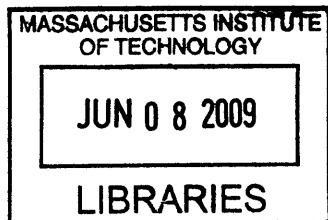
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## **Abstract**

Every 29 seconds a student drops out of high school in the United States and more than one million students stop attending school annually. African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans are disproportionately represented within this statistic: over one-half of them fail to graduate from public high school with their class. Despite these alarmingly poor rates of graduation for students of color in U.S. public high schools, there are examples of schools and school districts that have begun to slow this trend or reverse it, graduating nearly all of their students, regardless of ethnicity, within four years.

Primarily working with the same ethnic groups found at the heart of the depressing statistics noted above and in urban areas infamous for having under-resourced schools and communities, these learning environments have engineered what many would say is impossible: they have made urban schools excellent. This paper will analyze these models and answer the question “What makes a high school’s learning environment successful?”

A school’s “learning environment” can impact student achievement. Although the learning environment experienced by students is comprised of many elements like the physical condition of the school building, the community surrounding the school, students’ relationships with school staff and the school culture, the cases discussed in this paper indicate that teachers are at the center of improving student graduation rates.

This paper identifies some of the traits that enable certain schools and educators to overcome the dismal national trends in graduation rate in public high schools. Through case studies, participant interviews and observations covering four schools and one school district in different areas of the country, this paper will offer the following lessons to policymakers, parents, educators and young people striving to improve public school education:

1. Successful urban schools demand that students reach high standards and provide the support necessary for youth to meet those standards
2. Successful schools use relevant and purposeful curricula
3. Successful learning environments anticipate dropouts and intervene before the student leaves school

Thesis supervisor: Dr. Lorlene Hoyt, Associate Professor of Urban Planning  
Thesis reader: Dr. Pedro Noguera, Professor of Teaching and Learning

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# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 – THE DROPOUT EPIDEMIC</b> .....	<b>12</b>
THE IMPLICATIONS OF DROPPING OUT .....	13
METHODOLOGY .....	18
<b>CHAPTER 2 – CASE STUDIES AND INTERVIEW DATA</b> .....	<b>21</b>
CASE ONE – PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS .....	22
<i>Identifying the problem</i> .....	22
<i>The Academic Priority Initiative</i> .....	24
<i>Program dissemination and provision</i> .....	25
<i>Results</i> .....	27
<i>Lessons learned</i> .....	30
CASE TWO: JANE ADDAMS HIGH SCHOOL .....	40
<i>Context</i> .....	40
<i>History</i> .....	40
<i>Glimmers of hope</i> .....	42
<i>Identifying successful practices</i> .....	43
<i>Student feedback</i> .....	43
<i>Teacher and school staff feedback</i> .....	46
<i>“Good” teachers versus “bad” teachers</i> .....	47
<i>Lessons learned</i> .....	48
CASE THREE: THE HIGH SCHOOL LEARNING CENTER AT LAWRENCE HIGH SCHOOL .....	50
<i>Developing a nurturing atmosphere to keep kids in school</i> .....	54
<i>A tale of two teachers</i> .....	57
<i>“Lost” and found</i> .....	61
<i>Adults as detractors from the school environment</i> .....	62
<i>Lessons learned</i> .....	63
CASE FOUR: KNOWLEDGE IS POWER PROGRAM (KIPP) CHARTER SCHOOLS .....	66
<i>The fundamentals</i> .....	67
<i>The schools</i> .....	69
<i>Testing KIPP’s theory</i> .....	71
<i>Lessons learned</i> .....	72
CASE FIVE: BYRD COMMUNITY ACADEMY .....	75
<i>The Campaign</i> .....	76
<i>Lessons learned</i> .....	78
<b>CHAPTER 3 - CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>81</b>
<b>EPILOGUE</b> .....	<b>93</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>101</b>



## **Introduction**

Public high schools in the United States are in the midst of a crisis. According to a nationwide study underwritten by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2003, every 29 seconds a student drops out of high school in the United States and more than one million students stop attending school annually. African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans are disproportionately represented within this statistic: over one half of them fail to graduate from public high school with their class. The rate of attrition for these groups is extremely high, and predicted to increase (Bridgeland, Dilulio et al. 2006).

New research published by the Schott Foundation for Public Education (Smith and Holzman 2008), corroborates the Gates Foundation study: nationally, the average graduation rates for Blacks and Latinos are 47% and 57% respectively, as opposed to 75% for Whites. Perhaps the most distressing news from the same report is that those national averages are higher, in some cases much higher, than the graduation rate for Blacks and Latinos in many states and the largest school districts. Measured in terms of the difference between the state-wide graduation rate for White males and the state-wide average graduation rate for Black males, the numbers can range from 18% (Georgia) to 37% (New York), going as high as a 50% differential (Wisconsin) between the graduation rate for Black males and White males. While all young people enter the educational system full of promise, something happens along the journey that deters many from graduation.

Despite the alarmingly poor rates of graduation cited above for students of color in U.S. public high schools, there are examples of school districts that have begun to slow

this trend and even some schools that have reversed it, graduating nearly all of their students, regardless of ethnicity, within four years. Primarily working with the same ethnic groups found at the heart of the depressing statistics noted above and in urban areas infamous for having under-resourced schools and communities, these learning environments have engineered what many would say is impossible: they have made urban schools excellent. This paper will attempt to analyze these models and answer the question “What makes a high school’s learning environment successful?<sup>12</sup>”

The intent of this paper is to offer actionable lessons culled from research and analysis of cases across the U.S. to policymakers, parents, educators and young people with the desire to improve public school education. Chapter one will present the issue of the dropout epidemic along with its effects on communities and young people. The impact of leaving school prematurely will be discussed from an individual perspective as well as a societal one and particular attention will be paid to the disproportionately difficult position in which young people of color who attend U.S. public high schools find themselves. The job and life options afforded to dropouts will be covered and the

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the term “successful,” when used to refer to a school, teacher or educational body will describe an environment in which the rate of graduation exceeds the national average for all students of 70%. For information on how this number was derived, see EPE’s study and report, entitled “Cities in Crisis” Swanson, C. (2008). *Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytic Report on High School Graduation*. Bethesda, MD, Editorial Projects in Education Research Center: 16. and *The American High School Graduation Rate: Trends and Levels* by Heckman, J. J. and P. A. LaFontaine (2007). *The American High School Graduation Rate: Trends and Levels*. NBER Working Paper No. 13670, National Bureau of Economic Research. 1050 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-5398. Tel: 617-588-0343; Web site: [http://www.nber.org/cgi-bin/get\\_bar.pl?bar=pub](http://www.nber.org/cgi-bin/get_bar.pl?bar=pub).

<sup>2</sup> Although the standard for “success” used in this paper, a school surpassing the national graduation rate of 70%, is arguably very low, the author feels that attaining this goal is something that any school or district can realistically strive to meet in a short time frame.



focal point of this paper, “What makes learning environments successful?” will be introduced.

Chapter two will review case studies and interview data. It will offer an analysis of distinct approaches to real and significant problems faced by urban schools and students. Examples of school models and techniques that have led to high graduation rates or improvements in student achievement will be discussed and some of the successful practices used in each will be summarized following each case. The schools studied for this paper are set in different cities and regions of the country. The first case examines a district-wide effort to create dropout prevention programs and an early warning system that identifies potential high school dropouts across all of Portland, Oregon’s public schools. The second case showcases the efforts to curb the high rate at which students drop out of a poor performing school in the Bronx, New York. The third case features an alternative high school in the economically depressed city of Lawrence, Massachusetts that works with students who must overcome significant hurdles in order to graduate. The fourth case interrogates KIPP schools, one of the most successful, popular and contentious nationwide brands of charter schools. The final case looks at the efforts made by a classroom of fifth graders and their teacher to rehabilitate their dilapidated school building in Chicago, Illinois.

Each of the schools featured in this paper are affected by significant political and economic pressures while serving a similar demographic population. Some schools, like the ones in Lawrence, the Bronx, and several of the KIPP schools, exist in cities that have been rocked by recent scandals related to the city’s education administration. In Lawrence, the superintendent of schools has recently come under fire for alleged misuse

of Lawrence Public Schools' computer software and allegations of underage drinking in a local high school (Vogler 2009). New York City's schools have consistently been the focus of media scrutiny for their poor performance and the recent push for high levels of accountability from teachers, principals and the chancellor. Newspapers and other media outlets are quick to cover shortcomings of schools in both cities, which has led to very high turnover rates within schools and administrative positions. Economics also plays a key role in some of these schools' as well, as student results are tied to school budgets and principal autonomy. In New York City, certain schools and principals are given control over their budgets and may establish their school's spending priorities, but only so long as they meet strict performance standards. If they fall short of these standards, the school's budget becomes controlled by the city, the principal is removed and the school becomes the subject of press inquiries. All of the individual schools, the KIPP charter schools and some of the schools within the Portland Public School system have populations that are over 90% Black and/or Latino, which presents other pressures for schools and administrators.

Throughout each of these cases, particular attention will be paid to approaches and practices that have led to positive results with students (i.e., improved grades/ test scores/ increased investment from the student in her/ his studies). The examples reviewed in this section will be restricted to those which have led to at least *classroom wide* results; although the improvement or graduation of every student is important, this paper seeks to identify the practices that create larger and deeper impact than single student success stories. Shifts in classroom performance or graduation rates are the criteria for inclusion in this study. Attention will be paid specifically to successful practices that are seen in

multiple schools; in this way, the lessons culled from the cases in this paper will defy the immediate scale of the classroom or school environment. This paper's purpose is to document approaches and tactics which are replicable and transferable to educators, administrators and others involved in improving the educational attainment of urban high school students. An emphasis will be placed on practices that have been employed to improve the education of students of color since they disproportionately represent the dropout crisis.

Chapter three will recount the best practices from all of the data collected and connect these practices to some of the key issues faced by urban schools. This section will distill the information from chapter two and provide a review of the specific ways that students and classes were improved. Some of the steps necessary to implement these methods will be discussed. Finally, connections to other scholarly work will be made, offering further research and information on some of the key concepts that underlie the successful learning environments described in chapter two's cases. Throughout the paper, the extracurricular needs of students in these schools will also be addressed; for the purposes of this paper, addressing these non-scholastic needs is integral not only to the academic advancement of urban youth, but to their social and emotional development as well (Noguera 2003).

## **Chapter 1 – The Dropout Epidemic**

## **The implications of dropping out**

Failure to attain a diploma (or an equivalency degree like the GED) has far reaching effects on the young person, her/ his community and society. The most immediate consequences of becoming a high school dropout are diminished work options and low earning potential. As the first step in a cycle of poverty and social immobility, the dropout tries to enter the workforce but is trapped in a search for jobs that require minimal skill or training. For past generations, this obstacle was surmounted by entering manufacturing or industrial labor; these jobs and most of the industrial, low-skilled labor sector have mostly disappeared from present society, along with the safety net they provided for those with minimal education. Replacing them are service sector jobs that pay wages too low to sustain a family and offer few fringe benefits like health insurance.

If they are able to find employment, dropouts earn significantly less than those who finish high school. As an example of the income disparity between high school graduates and non-graduates, in 2002 the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that the average earnings of a Latino who dropped out of high school were 43% lower than Latinos with high school diplomas (Census 2002). Relegated to jobs with little potential for promotion or increased wages, today's dropouts have little ability to save money or apply their earnings toward continuing education, purchasing a home or other means of upward mobility. The dropout becomes part of the "working poor," (Sobin 1974; Shipler 2004), a group characterized by fragile financial status and an inability to accommodate the slightest increase in expenses. Emergencies like hospitalization or repairs to the family car cause severe problems for this group; attending to sudden and important bills causes lapses in rent payments, car notes or other financial commitments, frequently resulting in

an irreversible downward financial spiral. In an effort to make ends meet, the family ignores one bill in order to pay another.

Dropouts' inability to command a living wage reduces the number of areas in which they can afford to live. Without the financial means to change their environments, high school dropouts are usually forced to remain in lower-income communities. Concentrations of poorly educated people can negatively impact neighborhoods. Lochner (Lochner 2007) points out that there is a negative correlation between crime and education; areas with higher average educational attainment tend to have less crime (and conversely, areas with lower average educational attainment will tend to have higher rates of crime). More than just theory, the U.S. Department of Justice reported in a 2003 study that 68% of state prison inmates are dropouts (Harlow 2003). For Blacks and Latinos, the news is more dire: the same report showed that more than half (52%) of African American male dropouts in their thirties have criminal records, 44% of Black inmates are dropouts and 53% of Latino inmates are dropouts (Western, Schiraldi et al. 2003). Rates of recidivism are also depressingly high: reports by the Department of Justice and the Pew Center on the States' Public Safety Performance Project indicate approximately a 50% rate of return within three years of release for those convicted of committing certain crimes (Langan and Levin 2002; Warren, Gelb et al. 2008). The confluence of poor education, poverty and crime creates communities that threaten the potential of residents.

There is also a relationship between the average rate of educational attainment in a community and income and it predicts results similar to the relationship of individual education and earning power. As a case in point, the borough with the lowest average

educational achievement in the city of New York also had the highest number of households receiving cash public assistance in 2001<sup>3</sup>: in the Bronx, only 66% of the population aged 25 or older attained at least a high school diploma, versus Manhattan's 82.5%. In the same year over 12% of the Bronx's population received public assistance. This number almost doubled the figure for the next closest borough (7.3% of Brooklyn's residents received public assistance that year).

The children of dropouts also face difficulties. Research indicates that a parent's level of education plays a role in the development and education of her or his children. Poor parental education compounds the combination of low-income communities and pervasive low educational attainment. Studies regarding the development of the fundamental tasks in education, reading and writing, indicate that children raised in lower income homes read less, have a smaller active vocabulary and have delayed language acquisition (Qi, Kaiser et al. 2006). These same children usually perform these tasks with less aplomb than children raised in better educated communities and homes. Thus, the life options for the children of dropouts can be restricted as well.

Clearly, dropping out of high school is the beginning of a road with decreased opportunities and few positive options. The sobering nature of the life and possibilities available to people without a high school education has garnered much attention from those charged with stemming the tide. School districts, educators, academics and community based organizations have all devised methods to combat this alarming trend.

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Supplementary Survey and 2001 Supplementary Survey*, January 2003, slide 5. Washington DC: Government Printing Office.

While blame has been placed on a variety of causes, ranging from environmental issues to societal influences, most theories focus on what happens in schools and classrooms.

Curricular innovations and alternative pedagogical approaches, like those espoused by Paulo Freire, have been touted as untapped resources in creating environments that help students learn more effectively (Antrop-Gonzalez and De Jesus 2006). Another point of intervention has been school financing: in 1993, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) filed suit against New York State claiming that the state underfunded schools, thereby denying “students their constitutional right to the opportunity for a sound basic education” (Equity 2009). Inadequate teacher training (Tate 2008), bilingual education (Krashen 1998), and school orientation and racism (Lipman 2003) have all been identified as areas that can impact retention and graduation rates in public high schools nationwide. Additionally, nonprofit organizations that offer services aimed at decreasing the number of high school dropouts have proliferated over the past two decades as have requests for their services (Jones 1992).

While some of these methods have reported successes, few have been able to conclusively curb the increasing numbers of young people leaving school prematurely. Many of the successes achieved regarding dropout prevention have typically been experienced by smaller, more agile schools, usually operating outside of the traditional education system, like charter schools. New York’s school system, for example, has not shown any of the improvement desired, despite interventions in many of the abovementioned areas. According to a report authored by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center (EPE), New York City only graduated 45.2% of its students in 2003-2004 (Swanson 2008). Although the calculations used to derive the student



graduation rates vary, at best, the city graduated approximately 60% of its students in 2006 (Einhorn 2008). New York is not the only city that graduates a fraction of its students. According to the same EPE report, only eight out of the fifty largest cities in the U.S. graduate more than two thirds of their students. Serious and comprehensive intervention is necessary to rehabilitate schools and create environments that serve urban youth better.

While most of the approaches that have gained attention of late are aimed at wide spread, systemic change, the issues that often limit student success, and thereby contribute to the dropout statistics, are particular to schools and sometimes individual classrooms. Increasingly, these “learning environments” have become a major predictor of school and student achievement. Comprised of many elements, the learning environment plays a significant role in the educational experience of students. The physical condition of the school building, the quality of teachers and instruction, the surrounding community, students’ relationships with school staff like security guards and the overall school culture significantly affect children’s education and many schools and districts are taking notice. For instance, New York City, the largest urban school district in the nation, has recently devised a city wide survey which asks parents, teachers and students to rate their school in four areas: academic expectations, communications, engagement and safety and respect (Education 2008). This survey is distributed to each parent of a student attending a Department of Education (DOE) school and each teacher employed by DOE in the city. The main purpose of the annual survey is to assess the school’s environment by asking whether parents feel welcome in schools, teachers feel supported by their principal and students feel their school sets high expectations for them.

The reception a student receives and relationships she or he develops with school personnel are integral to shaping that young person's high school experience. Both of these factors are among the key predictors of a young person's high school success and are key contributors to the learning environment experienced by students.

## **Methodology**

What makes a high school's learning environment successful? Framed around this inquiry, this paper will identify the traits that enable certain schools and educators to overcome the dismal graduation rate in public high schools. This paper will take an "asset-based approach" to examining schools and their practices by assessing equally the practices of high performing schools and low performing schools. As will be shown in some of the cases used in this paper, some low performing schools have demonstrated the ability to work with difficult groups of students (i.e., young people returning to school after incarceration, dropping out or otherwise leaving school) and help them excel in school and graduate.

These schools were located within communities that are beset with issues (i.e., high unemployment, high crime, violence, etc) whose acute impact on students requires that staff and administrators in these schools deal with more than educational dilemmas. Although some of the schools featured in this paper are not the highest performing schools in an academic sense, these embattled environments still offer lessons that can inform the practice and approach of other schools. Instead of reporting what the lower performing schools do wrong, this paper will attempt to identify the successful practices within each of the environments studied.

To accomplish this task, numerous sources were examined. Interviews were conducted with administrators, teachers and students in high schools in Lawrence, Massachusetts and the Bronx, New York during the spring school semester of 2009. Utilizing relationships developed prior to this study, the author gained access to Jane Addams High School and the High School Learning Center at Lawrence High School and conducted classroom based group interviews with students in addition to structured individual conversations with students, faculty and staff. In both locations, the author has or is presently conducting dropout prevention or college preparatory programs focusing on students in their first year of high school. These relationships have engendered an environment of greater trust between school personnel, youth and the author as well as more consistent opportunities to experience the learning environment created in each institution. In this way, the author hopes to provide some service in return for the privilege of learning from school staff and youth.

High school students comprised one of the most important groups consulted in this study. Their opinion was one of the key factors in identifying the successful aspects of various approaches. Snowball sampling was utilized in order to reach as many respondents as possible as well as people who are not easily accessible to an outside researcher. Classroom, participant and school observations were also conducted in the above mentioned schools. Through watching the delivery of services by teachers, assessing student output and exploring each school, effective techniques used to help students learn and excel were documented. Students were asked for feedback regarding the approach that teachers used in class and evaluation rubrics used by administrators were studied. Additionally, case studies of successful school models and educational

approaches were reviewed and analyzed for practices that may be replicated by educators or other schools. Presented as syntheses of secondary sources like journal articles or case studies from consulting companies, these sections were enhanced by the author's research and professional educational experience. This paper also observed lessons learned from middle school classrooms. The lessons culled from these examples will be broadly applicable actions or interventions that have been shown to work with a broad range of grade levels. With some customization, schools, educators and other stakeholders will be able to implement some or all of the practices mentioned in this paper.

Through a combination of the above elements, this paper will attempt to identify some of the education industry's successful practices. The result will be a document that compiles winning strategies for educators, school administrators, parents, community based organizations and other stakeholders to implement in their efforts to end the dropout crisis plaguing U.S. public high schools.

## **Chapter 2 – Case Studies and Interview Data**

## **Case one – Portland Public Schools**

### **Portland, Oregon**

As part of an overall strategy to improve high school education in Portland, Oregon, the Portland Public School (PPS) system began in 2007 to examine the rate at which students graduate from its schools and create a system to identify prospective dropouts. To get a better idea of the effectiveness of education services provided to Portland youth by the PPS, the state commissioned a study of the 2004 student cohort. The results were sobering: only 54% of the students in this group had graduated from high school (Celio and Leveen 2007). Alarmed by the immediate presence of this national issue, the administration worked to craft interventions and mechanisms to decrease the number of students who leave high school prematurely.

#### **Identifying the problem**

It was decided that in order to remediate the dropout issue, specific traits and factors that impact student retention rates and performance should be identified. These traits would then be used to identify students on track for dropping out of high school and provide the assistance necessary to ensure the successful completion of their high school career. Using the results from the Celio and Leveen report as the basis for action, the administration, lead by a new superintendent of schools, focused on key findings. Five traits were shared by 99% of the dropouts identified in their report. Generally, dropouts from the 2004 cohort:

1. Failed to meet the eighth grade proficiency standards
2. Failed at least one core course in ninth grade

3. Were behind schedule in accumulating credits for graduation
4. Were “late entrants” to high school (i.e., students who enrolled in PPS for the first time in tenth grade or later), or
5. Were “re-enrollers” (students who withdraw from school and then return).

These traits were found to be the most predictive of high school tenure for the 2004 cohort of students analyzed. Further study allowed the administration to form two groups of students that met the above characteristics: “academic priority students” and late entrants. As depicted in the first set of graphs below, 47% of the total population that dropped out was identified as academic priority students. Within this group, a strong relationship was discovered between the number of core classes a student failed and the graduation rate: students who failed three or more core courses had a 32% graduation rate. As illustrated by the second graph, the graduation rate for students who failed only one or two core classes was dramatically higher at 61%.

Attendance was another indicator of the likelihood of a young person dropping out of high school. The report indicated that students who missed more than 20 days of school in the ninth grade were significantly less likely to graduate. As shown below in the third graph, these students had a graduation rate of 19%, compared with a 63% rate of graduation for those with 20 absences or less. Additionally, it was found that the above mentioned traits were not mutually exclusive: in many cases, students who missed significant amounts of school also had low levels of academic achievement and were either late in entering school or fell behind in accumulating credits. The final analysis of the report, combined with academic statistics on students compiled by the district, yielded

powerful and conclusive information upon which the district based its intervention program.

### **The Academic Priority Initiative**

Taking note of this relationship between academic performance, late entrance to school, absences and likelihood of dropping out and bolstered by research that indicated that the trend for dropping out begins in middle school (Black 2004; Allensworth and Easton 2007; Neild, Stoner-Eby et al. 2008), the PPS' administration implemented a district-wide campaign called the Academic Priority Initiative (API) which aimed to “increase the odds [of graduation] for Academic Priority Initiative students through early identification and development of supportive interventions in the ninth grade year” (Stid, O'Neill et al. 2009). Based in schools, the API was a multi-faceted approach to augmenting educational services and took into account both scholastic and non-scholastic issues confronted by students. Specifically, the API worked to identify eighth grade students who were deemed to be at-risk for dropping out of high school, assess their specific needs and provide extra assistance to them throughout the transition process from eighth grade into ninth grade.

The API offered:

1. **Support to school administrators:** The PPS provided school administrators with multiple means of support, among which were a “How-to Guide” for creating systems and accountability mechanisms at the school level, active coaching for school leaders to then share with teachers and, perhaps most importantly, consistent and frequent data reports on student progress throughout the school year. The PPS also



provided each school additional funds for professional development and other initiatives related to the API and dropout prevention programming. Administrators were also granted a great deal of latitude and autonomy to create API specific programs for their schools. This aspect was key, as it took into account the variety of school types, different student needs, variations in school populations and sizes, all of which factored in to student progress.

- 2. Individualized student evaluations:** The PPS also facilitated a massive effort to comprehensively and individually evaluate each eighth grade student. The evaluations, carried out by the students' teachers, assessed multiple categories including "life challenges," attendance, student academic strengths and weaknesses (see the evaluation template at the end of this section for information on the other data compiled by teachers). Key to this aspect was the fact that the PPS made a concerted effort to balance the tenor of the information provided in the evaluation so as to avoid stigmatizing the student or predisposing the school towards specific action (i.e., if a school received an evaluation detailing few strengths and a litany of weaknesses or life challenges, the school could act prejudicially toward the student).

### **Program dissemination and provision**

After designing the API and facilitating the student evaluation process, individual schools received the information and customized interventions for their students and school. The forms of intervention and assistance provided to at-risk students were based

on student specific factors and the characteristics of each school. For example, many the PPS' comprehensive schools, which were much larger and diverse than others, focused support of API students by shaping "academies" around efforts to assist API students. These groups of 100-120 students were assigned to a team of core curriculum teachers. The intent undergirding the academies concept was to personalize the large schools for at-risk students (PPS' comprehensive schools had between 1,500 and 2,000 students each) and facilitate relationship building between API students and teachers. Some comprehensive schools also worked to create an environment of collaboration between teachers by scheduling teachers' break or preparatory periods at the same time in order to facilitate communication between teachers about successful practices in working with API students. Many comprehensive schools also provided students with mentors, increased academic support initiatives like before- and after-school tutoring, created "double block" periods (i.e., two classes back-to-back) for core subjects like English and Mathematics, increased teacher attention to student attendance and increased the number of conferences held between parents, the students and all of the academy teachers.

Smaller schools responded to API students through a different set of services. Based on the distinct populations and separate issues that students of smaller schools faced, like smaller budgets, less diversity within the student body and lower academic achievement<sup>4</sup>, the smaller schools created systematic programs, in contrast to the customized approach taken by the larger schools. Examples of small school programs include flexible options for credit recovery, partnering with community based

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<sup>4</sup> Portland's small schools are mostly located in the city's poorer areas and have higher concentrations of poor and non-White students and, consequently, have lower academic achievement levels.

organizations to create intensive and tailored programs for each school, adjusting instructional practices and encouraging data-based decision making by teachers and increasing staff attention to attendance. Support given to teachers in smaller schools was also different: Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were developed, wherein teachers evaluated and developed instructional approaches based on in-classroom results and data derived from student performance. Another tool created by smaller schools was the use of intermediate warning signs, which were given to students who were underperforming and provided more time for students and teachers to adjust within the school year. Students who were not able to improve sufficiently within the term were also allowed to take “incompletes” as opposed to simply failing the class and being forced to repeat it. All students were also provided with specific information on the competencies they were required to demonstrate in order to pass each class.

Schools were not alone in crafting solutions to the dropout crisis in the Portland Public School system. The central office supported schools’ efforts to improve API student achievement by arranging regular meetings of officials from different districts and school administrators from all over Portland. During these meetings, administrators were encouraged to share results, lessons learned and successful practices and ideas with each other. To facilitate these gatherings and provide extra incentive for participants, attendees could receive credits from Portland State University by submitting some extra work.

## **Results**

Although the set of programs created and implemented by the PPS is nascent, it is already demonstrating positive results in reducing the number of high school dropouts in

Portland. Cleveland High School, a comprehensive school, has posted a 25 percentage point reduction in the number of students failing three or more core classes, one of the critical predictors of high school dropouts (Stid, O'Neill et al. 2009). Much of this success can be attributed to the school's experience in creating and facilitating student academies: Cleveland High School has offered academies for over seven years. In addition, the school offers a freshmen orientation for ninth graders. The school has also benefited from an administration that created and voiced a clear set of directives and measurable goals for students and teachers, among which were that API students were to have at least six credits by the end of freshman year, that their attendance would increase, that API students should be connected with at least one significant adult in the school and a reduction in behavioral issues. To effect these goals, Cleveland High School's API students were evenly divided into academies in which no one adult was responsible for more than five students and each student was provided a mentor. The mentor helped students get modified assignments, differentiated instruction or extra services like tutoring or social services. They also reached out directly to parents and provided incentives and support to students like taking them to concerts, out for pizza or attending the student's "big game." The school's counselors and teachers also worked together to refer students in need of special services; the efforts of the athletic department reinforced those of the teachers, mentors and counselors by mandating that all ninth grade athletes attend all available tutoring in order to play a sport. Cleveland High School also increased the number of parent-teacher conferences and grounded them in data and results specific to each student and her or his progress in school.

The small schools experienced some of the same success. One school, BizTech, had a 37 percentage point reduction in the number of ninth graders who failed three or more core classes. This was achieved through a combination of interventions: Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were formed and teachers collaborated with each other and other school staff to better serve students' needs and a new grading system was also created, which showed parents and other teachers exactly how students performed in relation to specific proficiencies in core classes. This also allowed teachers to be exact in identifying where students needed extra help in order to pass the class. The school also shifted other services it already provided, like tutoring, to reinforce the goals of the API and allow students more opportunities to regain credits necessary for passing classes and graduation.

Students were not the only ones affected by the API: a survey of PPS administrators conducted at the end of the 2007-2008 school year illustrated their approval and support of the Academic Priority Initiative. Over 80% said that the API had either a substantially positive or somewhat positive impact on the behavior of adults working with API students. Administrators also reported that the API engendered more personalized learning settings, awareness of specific academic issues and active learning by adults. Additionally, communication between schools and inside of schools amongst educators and administrators was improved. Most significantly, administrators said that the Academic Priority Initiative better prepared staff to know and develop a positive rapport with all incoming ninth grade students.

All of the above factors contributed to the academic achievement by students, which was considerable. A comparison of API student results with those of students who

met the same criteria but did not participate in the Initiative shows a 7 percentage point decrease in the number of API students who received D's or F's in three or more core classes. This translated into 90 more students who have a higher chance of graduating (keeping in mind the threshold for diminished graduation rates is failing three or more core classes). This raised the projected graduation rate from approximately three out of ten to approximately seven out of ten. A decrease in the number of absences is also clear: the rate of students with 20 or more absences dropped by five percentage points. This translates to 64 more students with a higher chance of graduating, a jump from approximately two out of ten to approximately six out of ten. See the last figure in this section for an illustration of these results.

### **Lessons learned**

While only a year old, the Academic Priority Initiative created and implemented by the Portland Public School system has already had a significant impact on the number of students dropping out of public high schools. Despite having arrived at these ideas through a rigorous process aided by consultant groups, most of the interventions that led to these impressive results were relatively simple. No extra staff was needed for many of the programs and schools did not have to fight for additional funds from the central office in order to implement the API. Many of the programs relied on the staff, equipment and management that predated the API. Indeed, many schools and districts in need of dropout interventions may have in their schools already the basic elements of the programs the PPS created.

This is not to say that what PPS engineered was easily accomplished. Few cities, or schools for that matter, could conduct a process as thoroughly and quickly as PPS did.

However, at the center of the API's success were specific goals and a vision which focused on the improvement and success of students who were found to need additional help. In this respect, almost any school that has the best interests of its students as its main objective can take lessons from PPS' example. Below is a list of the most salient aspects of the Portland Public School system's Academic Priority Initiative, divided into two categories, programmatic aspects and school environmental aspects:

**Programmatic aspects**

- **Collaboration** – At Biztech, teachers and other staff were able to learn from each other and discuss successful approaches to working with specific students or those who have specific learning impediments. At Cleveland High School, the entire school staff supported one another by reinforcing the same set of academic priorities (i.e., athletic coaches making athletes attend tutoring or counselors referring students to academic or social services). These methods reflect a cohesive and powerful message to staff and students: everyone in this school building is working to improve student achievement.
- **Asset-based communication** – In each of the schools profiled and the directives sent from the central office, the API students were not referred to as failures. Each student was viewed as being full of potential and able to excel, if given the opportunity and the proper environment. Teachers, school staff and the central school administration crew evaluated each student holistically, taking into account and documenting not only the student's weaknesses, but her or his strengths as well. In addition, each evaluation included extenuating circumstances (life challenges) like homelessness, poverty, abuse or other factors which could

manifest themselves in low academic achievement. The attention to the entire student and not just her or his test scores demonstrates a belief in each student's ability and an understanding that young people are affected by more than just what happens in the classroom and that they are more than a set of low test scores or deficiencies.

- **Taking decisive action** – The PPS did something rare when it found out that the graduation rate in its schools was lower than previously thought: it took decisive action towards a solution. Instead of getting hung up on researching or debating multiple approaches, the central office took specific and clear steps to empower schools, administrators and educators to help children. The steps it took and opportunities it made possible were simple as well – providing mentors, creating learning circles for educators and providing support, resources and information for schools.
- **Individual attention and evaluation** – To create the basis for the API the PPS commissioned a massive task: it evaluated each student holistically and individually. The information gleaned from this work was used to inform the approach high schools took in crafting interventions for students. Without this information, the action that the high schools took would have been generic, and most probably less effective, or significantly delayed as the school would have had to wait to accumulate the same knowledge of each student. In addition, this approach also sends a significant and powerful message to those involved in the process. The administration demonstrates that it cares about each student's



progress and mandates a similar commitment from teachers, school staff and administrators.

- **Communication between middle schools and high schools** – Integral to the success of the API was communication and information sharing between middle schools and high schools. By documenting student achievement in middle school and sharing this information with the high schools, the PPS was able to track students and prepare the high school in advance of the student’s arrival. High schools were then able to anticipate the challenges each student faced and create interventions that attended to those challenges.
- **Administrative support** – It could be argued that the API would not have been anywhere near as successful if it were not for the support of the central office. Indeed, much of the leadership and visioning was carried out by the central office, which also provided resources, tools and continuing support to schools and educators. This effort set a powerful example for everyone else in the Portland Public School system (including the students who, potentially for the first time, could see adults demonstrating faith in students’ potential and working to realize it).
- **Observing and reacting to data** – The PPS made many, if not all, of its decisions based on data it received or had on file already. Rather than take action based on individual opinions or anecdotes, the PPS rigorously tested and assessed the school system, each student in it and the PPS’ approach to working with the most fragile students in its schools. All of these steps and the actions taken in response were predicated on a substantial amount of evidence pointing to specific

problems. It should be pointed out that the majority of the data mined by the PPS was not new and was already on file. The central office made a conscious decision to operate using the information it already had and to tie the API's foundation to the rubrics already in use. This decreased to a minimum the lag time between identifying the issue, researching and planning actions and effecting the interventions. It also eliminated the possibility of communication issues between schools since everyone used the same information.

- **Universal support** – Although it is easier said than achieved, this case demonstrates what is possible when an entire organization, be it a school or a school district, operates in unison with the same intent and vision. Each teacher, mentor, counselor and administrator played a part in facilitating the API; more than a managerial feat, this unity of purpose reinforces the message that each child is equally important (i.e., no child gets left behind) and provides each PPS staff member with an opportunity to contribute, either through teaching, mentoring, counseling or referring students to services.
- **Focus on classroom based results** – A key component to the API was the focus on classroom based interventions, the most important of which was teacher quality. Teachers and those with direct influence on students (i.e., counselors, coaches, etc) were able to confer with one another and learn about successful approaches, discuss individual student progress and share effective tools. All of these aspects improved in-classroom performance for teachers and students.
- **Community involvement** – In each school, the number of parent-teacher conferences was increased and the information shared within these interactions

was specific to each student and each class. Community based organizations were also brought into the fold through referrals or collaborative projects that provided ancillary services to students. These efforts augmented the classroom based interventions.

### **School environmental aspects**

- **Staff buy in** – Teachers, administrators and others rallied around the same cause: increasing student support. This universal participation created a student focused environment, demonstrated belief in student ability and focused everyone on realizing student potential.
- **Caring teachers** – Research shows that student performance can be influenced by their rapport with teachers. Relationships and actions that demonstrate teacher caring result in higher student achievement (Antrop-Gonzalez and De Jesus 2006). This caring is defined by high academic expectations of students, a demonstrated understanding of student background and the effort to learn more about students. All of these characteristics were present in API classrooms.
- **Alignment of central admin and school admin** – A clear message and vision of providing more support to students was shared by everyone from the central office to individual classrooms; this created and reinforced a student centered environment.
- **Outreach to parents/ community** – The use of community members for API programs (eg, parent-teacher conferences, programs offered by community based organizations, mentoring events) bolstered the efforts of teachers and school staff, forming a community of support around students.

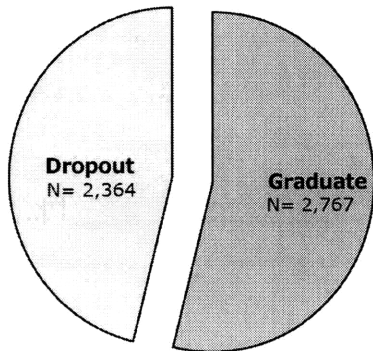
- **School based customization** – Although each school operated based on the same goal, programs were customized to suit the specific needs of students and the traits of each school. Principals and administrators were granted the latitude to mold programs around the needs of their API students, taking into account the differences in school cultures, populations and other factors that affect student performance. Each school’s knowledge of its constituency and experience with its students was respected.
- **Knowledge sharing** – Venues for collaboration and knowledge sharing were created, facilitating the communication of successful practices between educators, schools and districts.

## 2004 Cohort Graduation Rate & Academic Priority Students

Only 54% of the PPS 2004 cohort got a diploma...

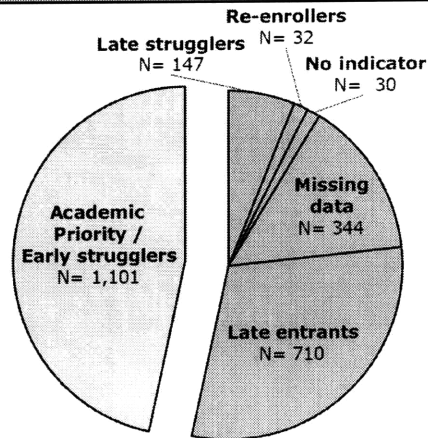
...47% of dropouts were academic priority students ("early strugglers")

Class of 2004 cohort



Total cohort = 5,131

Dropouts by segment

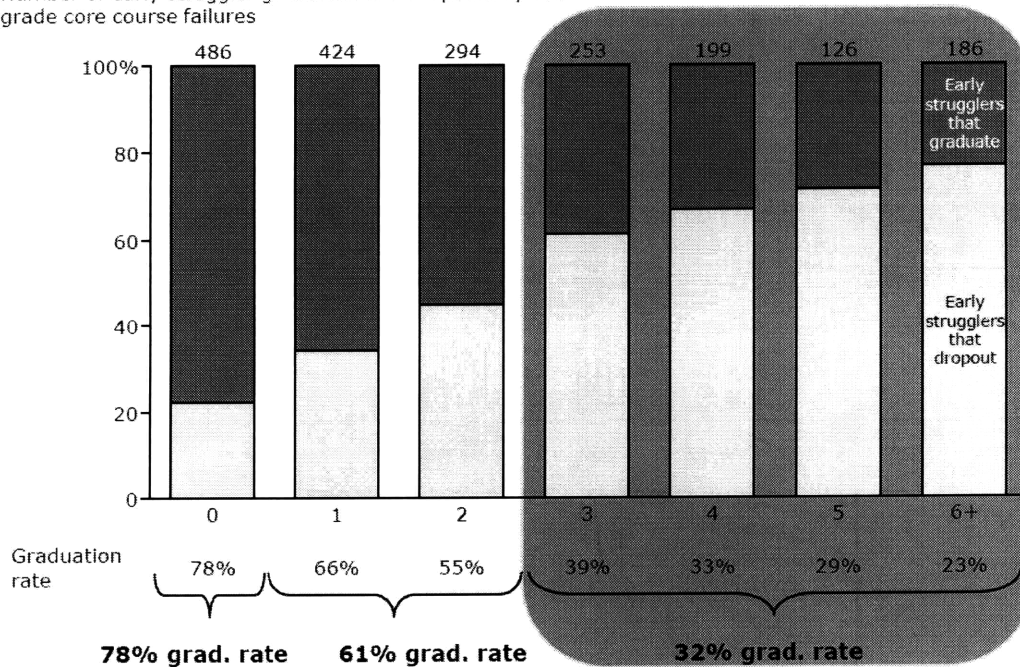


Total dropouts = 2364

Note: Each of these segments is mutually exclusive, therefore each dropout can only fall into each category once despite the fact that they might have experienced multiple events (for example failing in the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades). See appendix for detailed placement criteria for and explanation of segments  
 Source: Connected by 25, 2004 Cohort database, Portland Public Schools, Bridgespan analysis

## 2004 Cohort Graduation Rates for Students Who Fail Core Courses

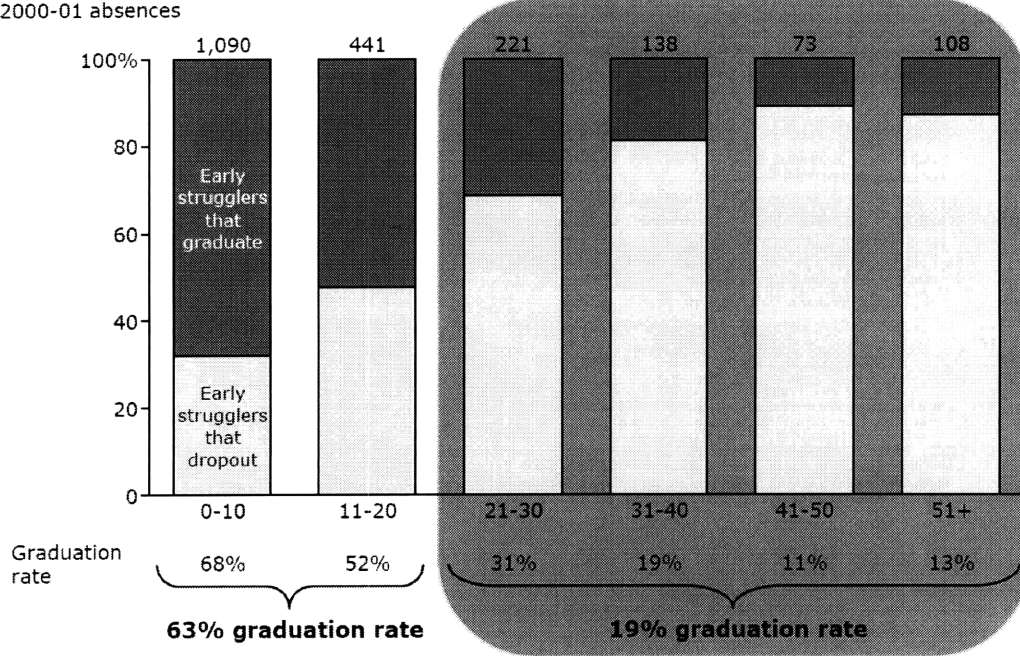
Number of early struggler graduates and dropouts by 9th grade core course failures



Notes: 9<sup>th</sup> grade credit information missing for 195 early struggler dropouts and 35 early struggler graduates.  
 Source: Connected by 25, 2004 Cohort database, Portland Public Schools, Bridgespan analysis.

## 2000-2001 API Cohort Graduation Rate Based on Absences

Number of early struggler graduates and dropouts by 2000-01 absences



Notes: 2000-01 attendance data missing for 118 early struggler dropouts and 9 early struggler graduates.  
Source: Connected by 25, 2004 Cohort database, Portland Public Schools. Bridgespan analysis.

## Individual Student Evaluation Template

*Blank data template that was pre-populated by district and sent to middle schools*

TABLE B | EARLY STRUGGLER STUDENT INPUT FORM FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

**School: XXX M.S.**

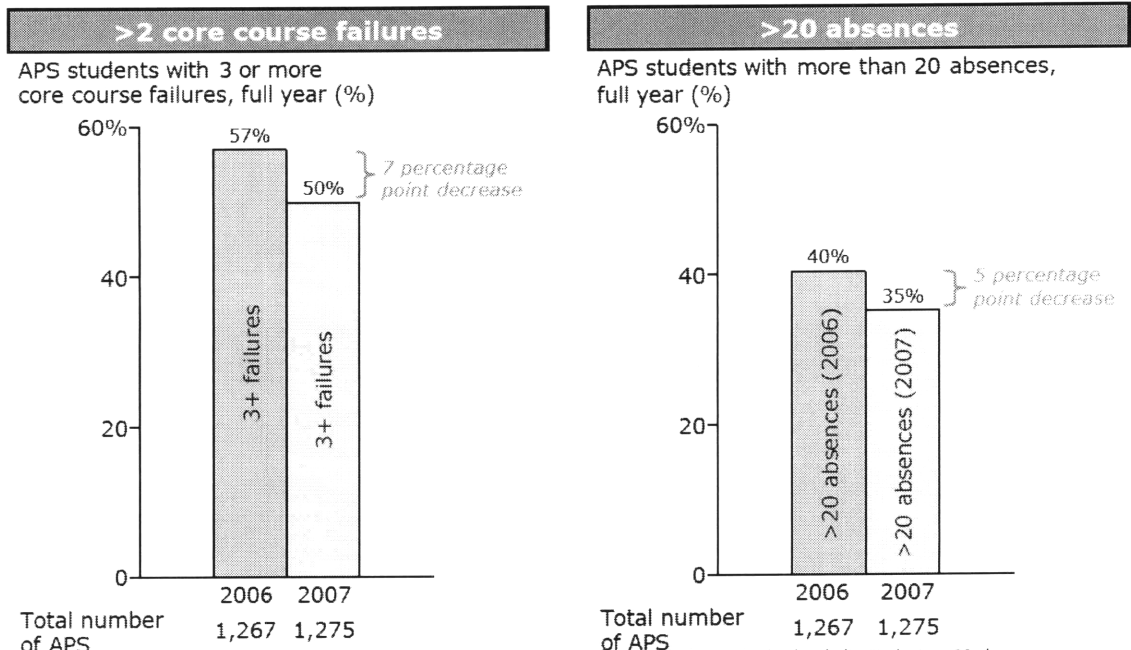
**PRINCIPALS:** Please fill out the orange boxes only. Once completed, save and forward this as an attachment to [redacted] at [redacted] no later than Friday, June 22, 2007.

**KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS**

Race: (AIAN) American Indian/Alaskan Native (Hisp) Hispanic (N/A) Unknown or Unspecified, (API) Asian/Pacific Islander

BASIC DEMOGRAPHICS						CRITERIA				M.S. INPUT FOR H.S. PRINCIPAL	
ID	Last name	First name	Gender	Age	Race	Struggler "type"	SPED/ESL?	Homeless/pregnant/parenting/foster child?	Attendance rate	Please comment on the student's strengths and academic/extracurricular interests	Provide additional information (if any) on challenges, potential supports and current categorization

## 2007-2008 API Student Threshold Achievement



\*See appendix for a description of the 2006 comparison cohort and methodology for creating it. APS = Academic Priority Students. >20 absences indicates that the student received 21+ unexcused absences over the year. "3+ failures" indicates that the student received 3 or more Ds or Fs during the year in English, Math, Social Science and Science. Total number of APS indicates total APS enrolled in October 2006 and October 2007 in comprehensive and small schools. The academic priority students enrolled in educational options (95 in 2006, and 81 in 2007) were excluded from the calculation because those schools did not implement academic priority initiatives or receive district funding to do so. There were 213 academic priority students who were not enrolled in school as of October of 2007, implying they were not present in the high school system (a similar number of "no show" students had also been stripped out of the 2006 numbers. Source: Portland Public Schools, eSIS database. Bridgespan analysis.

## **Case two: Jane Addams High School**

### **Bronx, New York**

#### **Context**

Located in the Bronx, New York City, Jane Addams High School has many of the traits of the typical underachieving public high school: a homogenous student body, an economically depressed environment surrounding the school, an extremely high percentage of students from families receiving public assistance and a dropout rate that has increased significantly over the past three years (from 2% of the overall population in 2004-2005 to 11% in 2006-2007). Compounding these factors are significant numbers of instructors who are either teaching without a certification or outside of the area they are certified to teach<sup>5</sup>.

#### **History**

In 2004, the school building was in above average physical condition: the walls looked freshly painted, all of the bathrooms worked and the building had functional specialized facilities for science and for its vocational offering, cosmetology. The entrance of the school was inviting and the main hall was lined with the letters of acceptance to college and universities received by seniors. School security was professional and serious about their job, without being disrespectful to students or others. The administration was well-organized and high functioning, relative to schools with similar student populations and in similar neighborhoods.

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<sup>5</sup> Source: New York State School Report Card from 2006-2007:  
<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/AllSchool.do?year=2007> – accessed March 17, 2009.



Recognizing the potential of the school, the Department of Education made Jane Addams an empowerment school in 2005, granting the principal autonomy over the budget, including several millions of dollars in discretionary funds, the curricula used in the school and the ability to select a team of lead administrators for the school. In exchange, the principal agreed to use this flexibility to meet high standards of student academic achievement.

Today, many of the above mentioned conditions are the same. The main entrance hall is still lined with seniors' acceptance letters from colleges, school security still has a good relationship with students and faculty and the building is in very good shape. Student achievement, however, has not improved. As reported in the New York State Report Card for 2006-2007, student achievement had decreased. One of the ways the state measures a school's progress is through student performance on Regents exams<sup>6</sup>. By this measurement, the school is performing poorly.

While hundreds of Jane Addams students take Regents exams every year, the percentage of those that pass the exam is low. Less than half of those tested in English, Mathematics A, Global History, Living Environment and Chemistry passed the exams. The other subjects tested did not fare much better: exactly half of the test takers passed the Mathematics B exam, 57% passed the U.S. History and Government exam and 55% passed the Physical Setting/Earth Science exam. The subject area of highest achievement was Physics, with 86% of test takers passing the exam. All of the statewide averages for

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<sup>6</sup> These tests are given to students in New York State high schools who complete mandatory coursework in foundation subjects; students must earn at least a 65 on five of the subject tests to graduate with Regents diploma, which demonstrates proficiency in each of the tested areas; those who earn between a 55 and 65 on the exams accumulate credits that can be applied towards a local diploma.

each of these tests for the same year (except for physics) beat Jane Addams' scores, sometimes by significant margins. For example, in 2006-2007, the statewide percentage of students who earned at least a 65 on the Comprehensive English exam was 78%, compared to Jane Addams' 47%; 75% of students across New York State earned at least a 65 on the Living Environment exam versus 42% at Jane Addams. The most marked difference in performance was on the Chemistry exam: 80% of students statewide earned at least a passing score of 65 on the exam, whereas only 20% of Jane Addams' test takers achieved or surpassed the same mark.

Additionally, there was also a huge decline in the number of students taking Regents competency exams between 2005-2006 and 2006-2007: Mathematics dropped from 74 test takers to 10, Science declined from 86 students to 12 and only 12 students took the Reading exam in 2006-2007, compared to 80 the year before. Similar declines appear for the other subject areas: 43 students took the Writing exam in 2005-2006 versus 10 the following year, the number of students taking the Global Studies exam dropped from 60 to 9 and only 10 students took the U.S. History and Government exam in 2006-2007, compared with 44 the prior year. These trends did not meet the expectations of the Department of Education. As a result, the school was recently stripped of its Empowerment status, the principal was reassigned and the Department of Education has threatened to assume leadership of the school and divide it into academies.

### **Glimmers of hope**

Notwithstanding these elements, there are signs of student achievement at the school. Despite its tumultuous academic record, the school managed to meet its state appointed progress goals in some key areas. There has been universal improvement in

students' classroom performance in mathematics, moderate improvements in English Language Arts and, most significantly, in 2006-2007 Jane Addams exceeded the benchmark graduation rate established by the state (indicating it graduated more than 55% of those qualified). These achievements have earned the school a temporary reprieve from Department of Education takeover. The school's permanent status, however, depends on replicating or building on these achievements.

### **Identifying successful practices**

This embattled environment presents serious challenges to its occupants. To ascertain what systems and interventions helped students in Jane Addams overcome the negative academic trends described in the first part of this section, students were interviewed and asked to provide their opinion of their "likes and dislikes" regarding the school. They were also asked to comment on the way that the school environment made them feel. During group interviews, classrooms of freshmen were asked open-ended questions regarding the school environment and its effect on their academic performance. Students were then asked to write out their opinions and experiences and submit them. Their responses were at times surprising and spoke of an environment that was supportive and school culture that was schizophrenic. Teachers and school staff were also interviewed and asked similar questions regarding the school environment and what factors contribute to or inhibit the academic achievement of students.

### **Student feedback**

Regarding aspects of the school that the students liked, many respondents stated an appreciation of specific teachers and commented positively on the rapport that these

teachers were able to develop with students. Respondents said that, in contrast to the majority of school faculty, these “good” teachers took time to explain difficult concepts, pushed students to excel academically and used alternative pedagogical approaches to make mundane topics interesting (indeed, some students even said that some of their teachers are “cool” and made class and learning “fun”).

When asked to offer examples of how these exemplary teachers may improve the interaction between students and instructors, respondents offered anecdotes: as an example of how school staff reach out to students, one respondent told the story of how teachers and school administrators reached out to her after the student’s mother died, doing “everything in their will to help me feel better.” Another student remarked that he benefited from “the few teachers here trying to help us in school, and in life.” Others spoke of feeling respected by teachers and described methods of communication between students and teachers that helped young people become more comfortable in class and with the subject matter.

When asked to provide examples of what teachers did to better engage students and present traditionally “boring” material, students spoke of an English teacher that had them listen to and read speeches from famous Black and Latino leaders like Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Marcus Garvey and Ernesto “Che” Guevara. Others mentioned that this same teacher had them study the lives of Shirley Chisholm and Rigoberta Menchú. This approach, as the students pointed out, was novel and much more interactive: the traditional method for covering the same learning unit was reading material from their textbook. Students appreciated the alternative approach and said they liked hearing the original speech or reading about figures reflective of students’

backgrounds. They also said that the shaping of curricula around their interests demonstrated attentiveness and diligence on the part of the teacher. This ultimately inspired trust and increased comfort between the student and the teacher, as the teacher demonstrated that she or he acknowledged and respected student opinions. Students attributed improved performance to this increased level of comfort with teachers and the rapport they developed. In classes taught by teachers who did not use techniques like those described above, students were much less invested in their academic performance and said they were more likely to simply not attend the class (or school in general). Students also appreciated that the school was safe. Many commented on the demonstrated effort of school security and the administration to prevent gang activity inside the school and in its immediate surroundings. One student, after describing a gang fight across the street from the school, said “the school safety wants the kids to be safe and not get harmed,” an opinion that stands in marked contrast to many other urban schools. The normal relationship between school security and students in these schools is described as antagonistic and heavily biased against students of color (Christle, Jolivet et al. 2005; Fund 2006; Fenning and Rose 2007).

While most of the students interviewed lauded the efforts of certain teachers and school personnel, they were also quick to point out teachers and practices that discouraged student achievement and detracted from a positive school environment. To the same degree that teacher quality was described as central to student achievement, respondents also said that teachers contributed to low student performance. Principal in their objections were “bad teachers.” Students ascribed to this group behaviors and practices like yelling at students, unfair enforcement of rules and favoritism. One student

reported “I dislike my school because the teachers are [impatient], they blame you for stuff [you] didn’t do and some of them don’t give you the attention and help that you need.” Recounting the effect perceived unfair treatment has on students, one respondent explained that he would rather skip class than be mistreated by a teacher. Many other students in the room echoed this opinion and said that the perception of bias or abuse by teachers made them want to leave school.

Low academic expectations from teachers also have deleterious effects on student performance, according to students. One student remarked that most teachers “have very low academic expectations so we rarely get any work done in any of the classes.” Contributing another opinion on how teachers impact student performance, one student said “some of my teacher[s] don’t have the time to take part in what we’re doing and show us the steps in what we are learning.” The total effect of mistreatment of students by teachers and low academic expectations from teachers becomes manifest in statements from students regarding their personal investment in school. When asked to write about how their school makes them feel, approximately half of the student comments ranged from “My school makes me feel uncomfortable at times” to “My school makes me feel like not coming to school because some teachers don’t take interest in what we’re doing.” Most pointedly, one student summarized the effect of the detracting factors listed above: “My school makes me feel like I’m not wanted here, like I’m a bad student, like I need special help.”

### **Teacher and school staff feedback**

Teachers and school staff also tell stories of diminished motivation. One teacher, when asked about the school atmosphere, said that the teaching staff suffered from low

morale because of the threat of being put under Department of Education control and divided into academies. This same teacher said “the school has gone downhill” over the past three years, remarking that in-school violence had increased, student performance had decreased and many teachers were on the verge of “burnout.” School security officers were also openly dismayed by the present condition of the school; one guard who was recently transferred to Jane Addams said that despite a very positive relationship with many students, he considered his job to be “keeping these kids out of jail.”

### **“Good” teachers versus “bad” teachers**

Observations conducted while in Jane Addams corroborate the correlation between student behavior and student perception of teacher quality. Student behavior was demonstrably improved in classrooms where the teacher was able to establish a strong and positive relationship with students. In these settings, students enforced rules themselves (i.e., asking one another to end side conversations), participation was noticeably higher and students appeared to be more engaged with the material and each other. The opposite was true for teachers who were not able to develop relationships with students. Instructors who were not able to develop a rapport with students took to yelling at students or challenging them in front of the classroom. One new teacher was witnessed screaming at two female students who refused to stop their side conversation. When approached and asked to be silent, one of the students simply said “no” while the other replied in a similar but louder fashion. The incident escalated, ending with the new teacher screaming at the students, stating that she “could get loud too.” The rest of the students, rather than being intimidated or brought to order by the teacher’s effusive

statement, laughed at her efforts. More conversations started, order was never restored and the rest of the class period was lost.

Student reaction to “good” teachers was the opposite. Students came to class on time, abided by rules and a healthier interaction was noticeable. This relationship was maintained outside of the classroom as well. As an example, while in the lunchroom, students went out of their way to say hello to one teacher. This teacher engaged the students in brief conversations about music, current events or other matters and demonstrated a knowledge of and respect for what the students considered important. Later in the period, some of these same students were seen running around the cafeteria and, in one case, walking on top of a cafeteria table. When approached by one teacher, the student ignored requests for curbed behavior. However, when the other teacher who had conversed with the student at the beginning of the period gave a disapproving glance, the student immediately got off the table and improved her behavior. When asked about the difference between the approaches taken by the two teachers, the student replied that she respected the latter more and that he was “cool.” Based on this increased respect and the strong relationship they had, she followed his rules.

### **Lessons learned**

Jane Addams, like many other schools, has some significant hurdles it must negotiate. Students say that safety outside of the school is a problem, as is the condition of the surrounding community. When they enter school, some students say they feel unmotivated, unfairly treated and as though teachers expect them to perform poorly. The school however, while at risk for being taken over by the city and divided into academies, still has some bright spots: close to half of the students spoke positively about the way the



school made them feel. The majority said that there was an adult in the building that they could speak to about something personal or important. Many of the students interviewed, while agreeing with their peers who said that several factors negatively impact the student learning experience, say that Jane Addams has caring teachers and school staff that push students and demonstrate a belief in students' potential for excellence. Below are the aspects of Jane Addams' environment that students said contribute to their learning and help them excel.

- **“Good” teachers and staff** – Students consistently described school staff and teachers as integral to student achievement. Those interviewed remarked that they are more apt to try harder, respect rules and attend the classes of “good” teachers. As described by students, this group of educators had a set of common features: they demonstrated a respect for and understanding of student backgrounds, had high academic expectations of students (i.e., they pushed students to excel), they made learning and curricula relevant and “fun” for students and were approachable.
- **Safe space** – Students appreciated the relative safety they experienced when inside Jane Addams as well as the staff's attempts to keep the students safe. Although violence still exists in the school, many students commented about the ability to come to school and “not worry” that something might happen to them. School security officers helped create this safe space by speaking with students and developing relationships outside of the typical “enforcer” role (for example, one officer was seen speaking to two boys about the upcoming baseball tryouts and wishing them luck).

## **Case three: The High School Learning Center at Lawrence**

### **High School**

#### **Lawrence, Massachusetts**

Upon sight of the High School Learning Center at Lawrence High School (HLC), visitors are greeted by vestiges of the city's former greatness: the school's lobby is adorned in intricately carved marble and its amber colored brick façade is embellished with light colored stone accents which bear the school's name and seal. The inside of the school is no less impressive: the classrooms and the halls are massive, some featuring plaques and dedications to graduates from decades past. In its heyday, the school served hundreds of young people, the progeny of factory workers drawn to Lawrence by the promise of work in the town's many large mills. Originally planned as an industrial city, Lawrence, Massachusetts quickly became a manufacturing mecca and began in the 1840's to produce goods that were then shipped all over the nation and across the world.

As more companies became established in Lawrence, the plentiful jobs and growing industry attracted people and families from near and far. During the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the population increased to approximately 95,000, fueled mostly by emigrants looking for work in the mills. In subsequent times, however, the demand for domestically produced industrial goods decreased and the once dependable factory jobs that lured people from other cities and countries became increasingly rare. As employment opportunities decreased, so did the economy, which was inextricably tied to the activity in the mills.

Today, Lawrence is an economically depressed city. According to the Census Bureau's 2005-2007 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates, the per capita income for Lawrencians (\$15,547) is close to half that of the national average (\$26,178). Over a quarter of the city's families (27.9%) live below the poverty line, while 29.4% of all people in Lawrence meet the same standard. Evidencing the change in occupational opportunities for Lawrence residents, the two sectors that employ the most people are the service sector with 22.1% and production, transportation, and material moving occupations with 27.1% (Bureau 2008).

Depicted as the "immigrant city" on its website, Lawrence still proudly brandishes its industrial and multicultural heritage. The city still receives many émigrés, primarily from Latin America, and many of the mills have recently been renovated through a number of innovative projects that have made use of the city's industrial pedigree. The school system has also attempted to take part in the renaissance by constructing a new, state of the art, Lawrence High School. The \$110 million dollar facility, titled the Lawrence High School Campus, houses six small scale, college preparatory academies. The superintendent of schools, Dr. Wilfredo T. Laboy said "The Lawrence High School Campus is the new 21st Century prototype for the conversion of large urban high schools into small, stand-alone thematic secondary schools" (Earnst 2007). As a demonstration of the campus' importance, dignitaries from state and federal government, in addition to officials from the city's office of schools, attended the campus' unveiling. Multiple press outlets also turned out to cover the event. The original Lawrence High School, which houses the HLC, has not benefited as much from the recent happenings in Lawrence. The stately and large school building has been divided

into smaller schools and now houses a high school (the HLC) and three middle schools.

Its unofficial secondary status becomes clearer when visiting the school building and confirming that it is Lawrence High School. Upon doing so, guests are told that “the Lawrence High School they probably want is in another location,” referring to the new campus. School security, teachers and the administration react in the same manner. In one instance, the principal, in response to an offer for a free college preparatory program facilitated by a graduate student from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), repeatedly questioned whether the student offering the program was in “the right place” and whether he understood that “we are not the new school.” Her hesitance in accepting a program from a prestigious university is understandable: as a Diploma Plus school, the HLC works with students who have not been successful in their educational pursuits at other schools and are either referred to the HLC or forced to enroll there. Many of the students simply have no other school willing to accept them and are relegated to the HLC.

When asked about their school, many of the students will, as most young people do, deprecate the school. As an example, during a trip to a local college, one student joked about seeing a rat the size of a small cat in a classroom. In mixed company though, such as when speaking to students who attend another school (especially one of the Lawrence High School Campus academies), HLC students speak glowingly about their school. This change of opinion and fierce defense of the HLC is intriguing. When the school is evaluated based on No Child Left Behind criteria or other similar national standards or benchmarks, it pails in comparison to many of its neighbors. In fact, the HLC is widely known for its constituents being those who either left or were made to

leave other schools. Its ranking amongst Lawrence's secondary schools does little to disabuse observers of its dubious designation as a "last ditch school." The HLC, according to its website and Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education statistics, has an exceedingly low graduation rate – in 2008, only 18.5% of the 54 student cohort received a diploma after four years of study. Almost forty percent (38.9%) of the cohort is still in school, while 42.6% dropped out. Of those that graduate, 71% go on to two-year colleges, while the remainder of students is somewhat evenly divided into military enlistment, joining the workforce or some other form of post-secondary education.

Upon first glance, these statistics are quite alarming. However, when considering the background of many of the students, some of the reasons for low achievement become clear. Nearly all (90.9%) of the HLC's students in the 2008-2009 class are described as "first language not English" students; 44.9% of the student body is considered to have limited English proficiency. Four fifths of the school population is considered low income and 72.8% qualify for free lunch, one of the national standards for measuring the economic capacity of a student's family. Many students in HLC's population fall within multiple categories (i.e., someone that is considered a "first language not English" student who also has limited English capacity and is low income). When the life challenges that nearly all of the HLC's students face like early parenthood, legal infractions, homelessness and abuse are factored in, it becomes apparent that many of them are working against the tide to simply stay in school. Some of the students' stories are have been featured on a program called Project Dropout. The show, aired on radio and television, documents the lives of high school students who are either at risk of

dropping out of school or already have. Half of the students profiled attend or have left the HLC. From this perspective, it is impressive that many of them are in school at all.

### **Developing a nurturing atmosphere to keep kids in school**

When asked to describe HLC's student body, the school's principal called them "the broken." In elaborating on the meaning of this term, she describes students whose lives have been interrupted by significant social, health or life issues. These events, she says, contribute to the difficulty of offering a typical educational experience for the HLC's constituency. As a result, student histories and experiences are taken into account at the HLC and inform the school's academic system and pedagogical approach. Both of these systems were devised to provide support for students and offer them another, better chance at graduating from high school and completing this crucial stage of their formal education.

As a "Diploma plus" school, the HLC offers students the opportunity to regain the credits necessary for graduation. This system is based on student competence in subject areas as opposed to time-based classes. In order to advance, students must demonstrate proficiency in each subject area through projects like essays, reports, participation in school events and completion of specific coursework. In addition, students must compile a portfolio which contains examples of work that meets specific academic, vocational and personal development standards. The focus and benefit to students of this approach, according to the 2008-2009 HLC Student Handbook, is that instruction under the Diploma Plus system "is more student centered and integrated across subject areas." The school also offers a program for students newly arrived from other countries. This program focuses intensely on developing students' English proficiency in a short time.

Upon advancing through their English Language Development phase, students are allowed to transfer to either of the six new academies in the Lawrence High School campus.

In addition to an academic system that is built around student mastery of subject matter, the school's pedagogical approach has been formed around developing a nurturing environment for students. In a very important way, this approach is the centerpiece of the school and how it helps students graduate. Based on an understanding that its students need more than help in the classroom, the HLC has created an environment that is structured around students' extracurricular needs and obstacles. Teachers, administrators and staff make efforts to address the unmet needs in students' lives that may lead to low achievement, decreased attendance and other academic issues (Noguera 2003). Through a variety of means, the HLC tries to meet these needs and support the student through her or his high school career. Some of the school's methods are relatively simple. As an example, most of the faculty and nearly all of the administrators speak fluent Spanish, which allows them to interact with and reach out to students and parents whose primary language is Spanish. This is key, considering that the 96.5% of the 2008-2009 class is Hispanic or Latino and many of them have recently arrived in the United States.

More significantly, the school's staff also works to bond with students. For example, one of the assistant principals plays a number of sports after school and on weekends with students and also arrives well before the beginning of the school day to meet with parents who may not be able to attend meetings at other times because of their work schedule. Administrators and some teachers also maintain an open door policy: if,

at anytime, a parent wants to speak with someone regarding their child's progress, they may enter the school and meet with a teacher or school official. The school environment is also tailored to the needs of the HLC's students. The class sizes are very small: according to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's website for the school, the average ratio of students to teachers in 2007-2008 school year was 11.8 to 1, in contrast to the district's ratio of 14.5 to 1.

Taken as a whole, the HLC has developed a school environment that emphasizes a patient, nurturing, caring approach instead of an academically demanding one. When asked to provide an example of how the school works to engender this type of learning environment, the principal tells a story of a girl who entered HLC years ago after suffering traumatic and recurring abuse. Upon enrolling in the school, the young girl exhibited negative behavior (i.e., falling asleep in class), irregular attendance and poor academic performance. The traditional approach to dealing with these behaviors from a student would have been to take corrective disciplinary action and enforce the school's academic standards, along with the consequences for not meeting them. In this case, however, the administration purposefully gave the student more latitude, allowing her to come to school late, and was more flexible than normal regarding the submission of assignments. Over the course of her first and second year, the student began to show signs of adjusting to the school environment. During her junior and senior year, the principal recounts, the student excelled academically, graduated and become one of the relative few that year to continue on to college. When asked about what contributed to the student's turnaround and academic success, the principal says that the young girl benefited from a loving environment, which was demonstrated by patience from teachers



and school staff and from relationships built on trust. Stressing the integral nature of this element to her work with students in the HLC, she said “sometimes there are things that are more important than grades.”

The school also tries to address the “social disarray” and the negative social aspects confronted by each student by working with community based organizations. To assist the comprehensive development of students, the school collaborates with or makes referrals to various social service agencies that can better attend to student needs. As an example, school administrators take part in monthly meetings with social service providers like the Department of Public Assistance, Department of Social Services and other organizations to discuss case studies of students and families whose needs go beyond what the school is equipped to handle. Program staff or directors from the organizations are in attendance at these meetings and can ensure that students and their families are attended to promptly. In creating this network of service providers, the school tries to control for some of the factors that affect the lives of students inside and outside of school. As an example, one student’s high academic performance in school was being threatened by a difficult situation with her family. Through networking on the student’s behalf, the principal was able to find the student a mentor who practiced forensic science, the student’s field of interest, and an academic mentor to ensure that the student’s performance in school did not suffer as a result of extracurricular factors.

### **A tale of two teachers**

Although the school has successfully taken significant steps to create an environment supportive of holistic student development, the HLC is not perfect. Perhaps nowhere is this room for progress more evident than in the markedly different approach

taken by two teachers in the school. One teacher has adopted a number of ways to reach out to students and help them advance. On most days, she can be seen having animated conversations with students in the halls during the time between class periods. She is conversant in topics of student interest and brings to school items and relevant information like magazines and articles on public figures or current events that intrigue students. She also takes time to participate in student events and field trips like a recent after school informational tour of a local college. After the tour (which finished almost three hours after the school day), she took students to a local restaurant for hamburgers and to discuss the merits of the school they visited. Her expenses for the trip (gas, time, meals for her and the students) were not reimbursed by the school nor did she attempt to have the costs covered by the school. She does the same for one of the leadership clubs that operates in the school. These costs or the outlay by the teacher were never mentioned to the students who participate in the events. She also recently began to share her classroom with the facilitator of a college preparatory program, which required her to leave the room for part of her preparation period. In addition to sharing space with the program, she has worked collaboratively with the facilitator to identify students who are interested in continuing on to college and provided feedback and assistance in crafting the program's curriculum. This teacher is very highly regarded by students.

Another teacher presents a very different approach to interacting with and inspiring excellence in her students. On more than a few occasions, she has been seen or heard complaining about her job, sometimes to students. She is known to be overbearing, once interrupting another class which had two other teachers and a counselor in the front of the room to lecture students about appropriate language. In response to her

confrontational approach, students became defensive, at first viscerally voicing discontent, then withdrawing from participation in the class. She too offers to stay after school and provide extra help to students, but, when few students attend, begins to blame student disinterest in extra learning time for ruining her afternoon. Going further, she was overheard saying repeatedly “I give up my time on the first nice day of the season, and you people don’t show up.” As a White teacher working with group of Black and Latino students, this statement did not go over well with the young people present. When asked their opinion of this teacher, students dismissed her, saying “she’s always like that,” the implicit statement being that they never take the teacher seriously. These students also relayed a story about this teacher almost being fired. Although the facts of the story were dubious, it was clear that had the story been true, students would not have been upset. This teacher has a much more confrontational style of communication with students; one morning, she asked a chronically tardy student why he was always behind schedule. The student, demonstrably embarrassed, became quiet and took his seat. The teacher, not satisfied with the response, continued to request an answer. After five minutes of inquisition in front of six other students, the teacher stopped asking.

Perhaps the most profound difference between the two teachers described above is not the way they interact with students or what they do with them, but the way the teachers talk about the students. When asked to describe their students, each of the two teachers described above does so in remarkably different ways. The first teacher speaks of her students as young people with potential who need various forms of assistance to overcome significant obstacles that make their educational journey more difficult. She references their intellect, curiosity and other positive qualities while also mentioning

some of the challenges HLC youth confront. The other teacher describes her students as full of issues and from bad communities, intimating that some are close to hopeless. She says, referring to activity in her classroom, “they don’t come to class, they don’t do homework and they don’t study.” This teacher references the shortcomings of students’ families and some communities in Lawrence, placing blame on some students for adverse circumstances and the resulting poor performance.

While subtle and often unspoken, these descriptions betray the subconscious opinions that educators and school staff have of students. These opinions also inform the approach taken by educators. Those who believe that students have potential and are able to perform at a high academic level treat students in an entirely different, and more positive, way than those who believe that students are beyond hope. By focusing on students’ deficits (or attributing the deficits to students and their families instead of acknowledging the panoply of factors that impact the lives of youth), these educators prejudice themselves to the possibility of student achievement. Following their inclination to believe that students are fundamentally flawed, these teachers adopt a number of practices that bring about the low achievement they predicted in youth (Noguera 2008). Examples of this type of behavior include diminishing their expectations of student work and providing less attention to these students (i.e., “ignoring the low potential students in order to concentrate on the high potential students”). Instructors may also demonstrate this deficit-based form of appraisal when they describe the interventions necessary to help students achieve. Those who describe school or policy adjustments to accommodate youth adopt a very different approach, one based on the identified assets of the student and her or his potential, than adults who say that students “have issues” or

simply need to work harder. Examples of each approach are illustrated in reactions to the description of typical HLC students: some instructors may say that the school should adjust its policies and environment to accommodate student background (asset-based approach), whereas other instructors may say that students should seek extra assistance, apply themselves more or change their behavior, milieu or community (deficit-based approach). While not mutually exclusive (i.e., young people do sometimes make bad choices that have far reaching ramifications), these approaches predispose teachers and school staff to specific actions (or inaction) which in turn impacts student achievement.

### **“Lost” and found**

In contrast to the deficit-based approach, the nurturing atmosphere developed in the HLC is reflected in the way that most school personnel speak about students. When relating a story about a brilliant student who left school and was later incarcerated for armed robbery, the principal said “we lost him.” Regardless of whether students were academically successful or not, the principal consistently spoke in terms of “holding on to” or “keeping” a student with the school. The sentiment described in this statement, a school’s or staff person’s ability to retain a student and keep her or him away from the streets or other negative elements, is one of the guiding principles of the HLC program. Students are described in the possessive sense (i.e., “our students” or “my students”) and this attachment to students is clearly related when the school staff shares anecdotes about the HLC youth. It is also demonstrated by efforts made by HLC staff to create an environment designed to comprehensively treat the needs of students.

## **Adults as detractors from the school environment**

In addition to the variety of social stresses that effect the school environment, school staff can also threaten the effectiveness of the culture developed by the school's leadership. The HLC's principal referred to some adults when describing the major impediments to student success. These adults may cause fluctuations within the school ranging from discord within the staff to personnel issues (i.e., finding qualified replacements or substitutes when a teacher takes leave or is sick). These issues, although normal within large organizations like schools, significantly detract from the time and attention that a principal can give to oversight of instruction, coaching of teachers and other mechanisms that contribute to the academic achievement of students. Most of the job of a school administrator, according to the HLC's principal, is focused on working with adults and resolving the aforementioned issues. In terms of time allocation, the principal said she spent 25% of her time working on matters related to students and the remainder of her time working with adults. Conversely, her ideal breakdown of time would be spending 75% on classroom observation, developing and modifying teacher practice and curriculum and student learning. The remainder of her time would be spent on administrative tasks.

Although it would be difficult to establish an empirical connection between the function (or dysfunction) of school staff and student achievement, a more general conclusion can be reached based on the principal's feedback: the more time an administrator must spend attending to adult issues, the less time she or he has to dedicate to curricular matters.

## **Lessons learned**

By far, the High School Learning Center at Lawrence High School is not a perfect learning environment. Abysmal test scores and a high dropout rate attest to this. The school does, however, work with a group of students that no other school wants, literally. The HLC receives young people that some people say should not be in school. Many students' ages are not congruent with their level of proficiency in basic academic skills or with their credit accumulation (keeping in mind that HLC uses aggregate credit counts instead of typical grade designations). The fact that many of these young people are in school is an achievement; their attendance is testimony that something attracts them and makes them return to the HLC.

According to the principal, a microcosm of the accumulated effect of these issues strikes HLC students in their last year of study before graduation. These students, en route to graduation, are about to sample success for perhaps the first time in their lives. Instead of running towards the "finish line" and pouring themselves into the last bit of work necessary to receive their degree, many students sabotage their progress and begin to behave in ways that are detrimental to their future. Citing the framework used by Ruby Payne in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne 1996), the principal says that the students commit this self-sabotage in order to return to normalcy, which, for a group of students with backgrounds like those in the HLC, is failure. Confronted with stepping into a realm of possibilities that are completely foreign, students choose to remain in an area that is well known to them. For many, college is only something they have heard about through movies or television shows. Few HLC students have parents who have high school diplomas, let alone college degrees. In one classroom of 18 students, only

one student's parent had attended college. The majority of these students come from families and communities where completing high school is the highest academic achievement attained; thus, college is the unknown, and they have no connection to it or information about it.

Clearly, the psychological barriers to success and achievement are profound and numerous for students at the HLC. This makes the school's ability to work with and retain students all the more remarkable. Below are some of the ways that the HLC helps keep young people in school and on track for graduation.

- **Respect and trust** – When asked to speak about the factors that brought students to the HLC, made them stay in school and work to achieve, one student spoke of the respect he is given by teachers and the bond he has been able to create with them. This relationship, according to the student, was based on reciprocal learning which demonstrates teachers' respect for student knowledge (i.e., teachers learning from students and students learning from teachers). This relationship increased the student's confidence and self-esteem, which led him to believe that he could accomplish whatever he committed himself to. This close and respectful relationship is also demonstrated in the case of the first teacher described above. She consistently worked to understand student interests and incorporated them into class work, supported student activities on her own time and with her own resources and, as a result, had excellent rapport with her students.
- **Alternative priorities** – The school and its principal state a preference for providing a student with patience and as many forms of support as possible instead of an academically rigorous environment. It should be noted that although



the school has this preference, it still pushes students to excel academically and to apply themselves to their studies. Academic achievement is not, however, the singular focus of the school. The lack of success in other schools and protracted issues faced by HLC students create an increased fragility amongst the student body. Failure to address and accommodate this in its approach would lead to students dropping out of school in much higher numbers or simply failing to report to school in the first place. The school creates opportunities for what the principal calls “small victories,” small-scale but meaningful accomplishments for students. Examples of these opportunities include commendations for attendance and academic improvement.

- **Accounting for “other factors” in students’ education** – The HLC has devised a number of ways to remediate societal and familial issues faced by students: it works with local organizations to provide referral services and other resources that augment treatment provided in school; it structures staff and administrator time such that they are able to meet with parents as necessary; it exhorts flexibility from staff along with extra effort to accommodate students’ backgrounds; school administrators and teachers perform outreach, contacting parents or guardians to check in regarding student performance and absence. According to student and administrator feedback, these elements are central to the retention of the HLC’s students.

## **Case four: Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools**

### **Nationwide**

Conceived in 1994 by two participants in the Teach for America program, KIPP Charter schools have grown to become one of the most well known and respected school brands in the nation. Since their creation, KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) middle schools have gained notoriety for consistently demonstrating high student achievement amongst students from low-income families. According to their website, “In 2007, nearly 95 percent of KIPP alumni went on to college preparatory high schools.<sup>7</sup>” Another boast: despite many fifth grade students entering KIPP one or more years behind in their studies, “After four years at KIPP, 100 percent of KIPP eighth grade classes outperformed their district averages in both mathematics and reading/English language arts, based on state tests.<sup>8</sup>”

Similar success has been experienced in KIPP high schools: “Ninety-nine percent of KIPP Houston High School eleventh grade students passed the state test in math, English language arts, science, and social studies, outperforming both the district and state passing rates in those subjects;” “In the spring of 2008, KIPP Houston High School graduated its first class of seniors—with 96 percent going on to four-year colleges and universities in the fall.<sup>9</sup>” Statements of excellence achieved by students from disadvantaged backgrounds litter the organization’s website: multiple decile increases on

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<sup>7</sup> Source: <http://www.kipp.org/01/> - accessed 4/15/09.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Source: <http://www.kipp.org/01/reportcard.cfm#high> - accessed 4/15/09.

standardized tests, high aggregate amounts of KIPP students earning admission to college and millions of dollars in scholarship money awarded to KIPP students upon entering college.<sup>10</sup> These accomplishments are even more impressive when the population served by KIPP schools is considered. By design, KIPP schools are located in underserved areas. The majority of people in these areas are either Black or Latino; as a result, most KIPP students are Black or Latino. Nationally, over 80% of KIPP students are eligible for the federal free and reduced price meals program, and more than 90 percent are Black or Latino.<sup>11</sup>

As discussed in the first chapter of this paper, the achievements of KIPP students stand in stark contrast to the nationwide performance of students from the same backgrounds. The sizeable gap in performance has caused some to question the veracity of KIPP's claims. While there is a great deal of literature extolling the virtues of KIPP, the number of critical reports and assessments of KIPP's accomplishments is growing.

### **The fundamentals**

The KIPP school model is based on a belief that every student, regardless of background, should have the opportunity to choose what they want to do in life. The schools work to “set underserved students up for success in college and life.<sup>12</sup>” To effect this goal, KIPP devised “Five Pillars” that define all of its operations:

1. **High Expectations** – The schools have clear and measurable goals for student achievement and conduct; regardless of the outcome, student background is not considered as an option for explaining performance

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<sup>10</sup> Source: <http://www.kipp.org/01/resultsofkippsch.cfm> - accessed 4/15/09.

<sup>11</sup> Source: <http://www.kipp.org/01/kippfaq.cfm> - accessed 4/15/09.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

(i.e., since the student is poor, teachers and staff should accept lower performance). Behavior and achievement are either enforced or curbed through a system of rewards and penalties that include monetary compensation for good behavior and semi-exclusion from the classroom environment for poor behavior, among other strategies.

2. **Choice and commitment** – Students, their families and school staff all must participate in the school environment voluntarily. Each person affirms this commitment to the school and its core values by signing a statement which outlines the expected behavior and contribution from each member. Examples include punctuality, respect for everyone in the school, dedication to hard work and a promise to support the hard work of others (i.e., a parent promising to help their child or a teacher promising to do “whatever it takes” to help children learn.)
3. **More Time** – KIPP schools are based on a longer school day, school week and school year. School starts at 7:25 AM and ends at approximately 5 PM, takes place every other Saturday (although with shortened hours) and goes through July.
4. **Power to Lead** – School principals (or “school leaders” as KIPP calls them) are given autonomy in shaping the school environment and its elements. The budget, staff and other key factors that define the school are all at the disposal of the school leader. In exchange, each school is held to strict performance standards.

- 5. Focus on Results** – Objective measures of student and school success like standardized tests, graduation rate and college admission rates are the basis of evaluation for KIPP schools, teachers and administrators. As with the students, excuses from teachers and staff are not allowed in instances of student failure or school shortcomings.

### **The schools**

As described by Jay Matthews, a journalist that writes about education for the Washington Post, the Five Pillars of KIPP schools create an environment that is upbeat and focused on college (Matthews 2009). On any given day, in any given KIPP school, students can be overheard singing songs in class to aid their learning, banners from universities line the halls and incoming classes are called by the year of their anticipated graduation from college (i.e., freshmen entering high school in the year 2009 are called “the class of 2017”). Setting aside Matthews’ effusive description of KIPP schools (he has been writing consistently glowing articles about the chain of schools practically since their inception), his description is corroborated by other scholars who have studied KIPP (Choi 2003; Coats 2004).

Another feature of the schools is the close relationship that is cultivated between faculty and students. KIPP schools have a policy that teachers be available to students after school hours via cell phone; according to Matthews (2009), this rule has resulted in students and their parents frequently contacting teachers and school administrators with questions regarding homework or other matters that would impact the students’ performance in school. Students became so close to teachers, which at the beginning of KIPP included the founders Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, that students would contact

them in emergencies or when faced with extracurricular issues they could not attend to on their own.

The classrooms also feature invocations of discipline and diligence. Exhortations of student (and teacher) effort like “No shortcuts, No excuses” have come to define the image of KIPP schools. The most famous of these, “Work hard, Be nice” has become a tag line on the organization’s website and is also the title of Matthews’ book. KIPP schools also mandate the use of student uniforms, have students chant phrases and answers to questions and purposefully do not use a standard curriculum like those used in regular public schools (Matthews 2009). Instead, individual schools and teachers create the curricula and then submit the materials to the KIPP Foundation, the central organization coordinating all the schools. These materials are then refined and repackaged to be sent to other schools in the KIPP network (Husock 2006).

All of these practices have become known as the traits of KIPP schools, which, as discussed above, have been wildly successful in terms of improving student achievement. Their stellar record of accomplishments while working with a population whose ability few have expressed hope in has spurred much admiration and attempted replicas of the “KIPP formula.” In response to the attention and defending against damage to the organization’s reputation or image, KIPP trademarked its name and began licensing it to new and existing schools within the network. Schools started under the KIPP name must meet performance criteria and other rules like adherence to the Five Pillars and be led by a graduate of KIPP’s training program for principals. If schools fail any of these standards and do not correct the infraction, they risk losing the right to use the KIPP name (although they could still continue to operate as a charter school).

## **Testing KIPP's theory**

Based on the amount of spectacular press like news coverage on the heralded primetime news show *60 Minutes* and the tremendous success of its schools, KIPP has begun to receive increasing amounts of attention over the past few years. With greater frequency, this attention has turned into speculation and examination of KIPP's methods and the ways it engineers its impressive results. Some of the most pointed criticisms, as related in Matthews' book, have called the KIPP model militaristic, said that there is an element of racial dominance (since there are Whites in leadership roles in some of the schools and the two founders are White, while most of the students in KIPP schools are non-White) and that KIPP protects its reputation by removing troubled or failing students. While much of these claims are subjective and based on personal interpretation of KIPP's practices, several studies have recently been performed by academics looking to disprove the schools' success.

Most of these reports have been based on theories related to "creaming" (the selection of the highest performing students), high rates of student attrition in KIPP schools, extracurricular supports possessed by KIPP students that enable the high rates of achievement (i.e., KIPP kids come from better homes) and the unsustainable nature of KIPP schools based on the demands placed on staff and students (Doran and Drury 2002; Institute 2005; Musher, Musher et al. 2005; Iver and Farley-Ripple 2007; Ross, McDonald et al. 2007). These allegations have challenged KIPP's impeccable record and set off a debate amongst scholars. Several research papers and studies which examine the issues mentioned above have been recently published. Columbia University professor Jeffrey R. Henig (Henig 2008) has evaluated seven of these studies and written a brief

that reviews and interrogates their findings. The central purpose of Henig's paper is to examine the internal and external validity of each study in an effort to understand whether and in what ways KIPP schools raise student achievement.

Henig finds that, as reported in the KIPP Report Card (Foundation 2007), KIPP students outperform students in traditional public schools. Further, the positive results in the schools are not attributable to a selective admission process, although students may indeed benefit from higher levels of motivation and support than others. Additionally, significant student attrition can reduce the academic gains reported by KIPP, although it would not explain the noted difference between KIPP students and others. KIPP students were also shown to improve academically in every year of study, although not to the same degree (i.e., growth in the first two years, is noticeably higher than in later years). Henig also reports that high turnover, due to the demands placed on teachers and school administrators, raises questions about the sustainability of the KIPP model.

### **Lessons learned**

Not to be lost in the scholarly debate is the essential finding that KIPP schools, while not perfect, are very successful at inspiring academic excellence in disadvantaged students. The schools have posted results and improvements that were previously unimaginable. Schools nationwide, regardless of their designation as charter or district, stand to benefit from an analysis of KIPP's environment. Below are some of the elements that make KIPP's amazing results possible.

- **Universal high standards** – One of the hallmarks of KIPP schools is their demand of high performance from staff and students. Unlike at many other schools, each KIPP student is thought to be capable of a high level of



achievement, regardless of her/ his background or possible impediments.

Teachers hold students accountable for submitting high quality work and provide help to students who are not producing to their maximum ability. The same standard is held for teachers: they are expected to help their students learn effectively and demonstrate progress on measures like standardized tests.

- **Faith in students' ability** – Concomitant with the high standards is a deep faith in the ability of students to excel academically. Teachers are expected to develop demanding lessons and assignments based on the idea that students can “rise to the challenge.” In marked contrast to the practice of “teaching to the middle of the class,” KIPP’s classroom model focuses on presenting students with work that is at the threshold of their ability. Students who have trouble completing assignments or following lessons are able to contact teachers and get extra assistance.
- **Longer learning time** – The KIPP schedule keeps kids in class much longer than regular schools. This extra time is used key to helping students master difficult concepts.
- **Teacher dedication** – The extended learning time that benefits KIPP’s students necessitates more from teachers. This extra demand placed on faculty and staff is evidence of a dedication to the school and students. Although KIPP teachers are paid slightly more than regular school teachers (Medina 2009), this extra money is not proportional to the extra time they spend in the classroom and at school.
- **Principal autonomy** – KIPP school leaders enjoy the ability to manipulate the budget as they see fit and can hire or fire staff without worrying about union

intervention. These management tools allow principals to shape the school environment as few others can. As a result, most KIPP schools have staff whose motivations align with those of the school. A school unified around specific goals (i.e., student achievement) can be much more effective than one whose staff have varied opinions and many unrelated goals.

- **Uniform leadership training** – In order to become a school leader at a KIPP school, each potential principal must apply, be accepted to and pass a training course overseen by the leaders of the KIPP Foundation. This ensures that each school is run by someone who shares KIPP's values, is trained in its methods and knows the organization's culture.
- **Individual curriculum development** – Each teacher in a KIPP school is given the opportunity to develop her/ his own curriculum. This allows each teacher to shape the learning tasks around the class' interests and performance level. The central office assists teachers by compiling curricula created by teachers and providing it to schools in the KIPP network.

## **Case five: Byrd Community Academy**

### **Chicago, Illinois**

In many ways, the students of classroom 405 that Brian Schultz (Schultz 2007) writes about typify many young people who attend urban schools: many are poor, most are Black or Latino and they live in a neglected and dangerous area of the city. This area of Chicago, Cabrini Green, is described by Schultz as having a reputation as one of the most dangerous and infamous public housing projects in the United States. Although the neighborhood has gone through many changes recently (large scale redevelopment marked by the replacement of 18,000 apartments in enormous public housing towers with mixed income housing in townhouse style buildings), the school building in which Shultz teaches the students of classroom 405 suffers from a myriad of issues reminiscent of the worst times in Carbini Green's history: consistently failing infrastructure (no heat during winter and broken windows, toilets and sinks), no gymnasium, cafeteria or auditorium and a less than desirable location in close proximity to a violent housing project. In addition to these issues, the school, Byrd Community Academy, was in the unenviable position of being the last physical remnant of the area's inglorious past, precisely as the city, state and many powerful organizations were trying to replace low income residents with mixed income renters and homeowners (i.e., wealthier people). All of these factors added up to create a palpable feeling of displacement and neglect for the students in Schultz's classroom.

Despite the trite conditions, the students of classroom 405 were bright, inquisitive, and eager to learn. During conversation one day, the students spoke to Schultz about the

deplorable condition of the school and their community. They shared their thoughts about how the school should be improved, what the city's powerbrokers could do to help and how the school detracted from their learning opportunities. Based on this conversation, Schultz launched what would become a year long advocacy project, led by his fifth grade students, aimed at bringing attention to the school's condition and encouraging action from anyone that would listen. The story of the campaign's birth and development, as well as its impact on the students involved, is instructive and profound. It paints a picture of a classroom full of children who ostensibly would be at the lower end of the achievement gap but through a combination of key elements and interventions became wildly successful as activists and students. Several aspects of the approach taken by Schultz, the principal and others provide vivid lessons in how to elicit great results from young people, regardless of circumstance.

### **The Campaign**

What began as a lunchtime talk lamenting the foibles of their school turned into a watershed learning experience for the students of classroom 405. Their teacher, apparently just as confused and frustrated about the school's conditions as the students, sat with them and helped the young people air their grievances. As the discussion grew in length, and the students became more impassioned about the way attending school at Byrd made them feel, Schultz, their teacher, asked them a simple question: "What do you think needs to be improved about your community?" The students responded with eighty-nine issues suffered by the school building itself or the surrounding community. Schultz, as excited about the list as the students were to contribute, began to ask more questions

and encouraged the students to not only contribute issues, but to think about solutions and methods to achieve them.

Over the next few weeks, Schultz began to shape the curriculum around the students' desire to improve their school environment. Students wrote about their campaign and crafted literature to convey their requests to others, created websites and made trips to lobby various powerbrokers. They read of other schools in similar disrepair through Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (Kozol 1992) and other works, wrote emails and letters to elected officials, conducted phone and in person interviews and undertook a significant outreach strategy that led to their attendance and testimony at the Illinois State Board of Education. Students from classroom 405 were also asked to deliver the keynote presentation at the national convention of Project Citizen, facilitate a session at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago and guest speak at a number of college campuses and conferences.

No longer faced with textbook problems and seemingly irrelevant issues, the students came alive as they identified, contended with, and tried to solve an actual social problem (Freire 1970; Freire 1995). Together, the students and their teacher crafted a plan of action, materials to convey their message and contacted everyone they thought could lend a hand or cause change, ranging from other teachers to the mayor, the Board of Education to state legislators. Academically, the students improved markedly: according to Schultz, standardized test scores for most of the class increased from the previous year, some by multiple quartiles, despite no time being spent drilling students on the skills necessary for improvement on the tests. Attendance also increased dramatically (to an aggregate 98%), and cases of misbehavior and discipline problems were rare.

These last two improvements are especially surprising, considering the propensity for schools that share Byrd's description to have classroom management and behavior issues.

### **Lessons learned**

The results of the year long campaign undertaken by Byrd Community Academy's classroom 405, while ultimately unsuccessful in that a new school was not built, were incredibly powerful and rich in lessons that can guide other teachers and schools in encouraging excellence and engaged participation from students. An increasingly rare combination of elements formed to make the success achieved by classroom 405 possible. Listed below are some of the most significant.

- **Relevant curriculum** – The report *The Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland, Dilulio et al. 2006), points out that one of the major causes identified by students surveyed as a reason for leaving school was a boring curriculum. Presented with material that asks them to consider matters that are foreign and meaningless for their lives and aspirations, students divorce themselves from schoolwork and learning activities. The students in this case were confronted with a matter that had a direct impact on their lives: the condition of their school building. Additionally, the curriculum was created and guided by the classroom interest; Mr. Schultz used the focus of the children and their desire to improve their school building to guide the materials he introduced to the class.
- **Administrative support** – Few of the accomplishments of the classroom 405 students would have been possible without the support of the school's principal. As discussed in the article, Schultz spoke with and lobbied the principal early on, stating that the issue and new approach was a great way to reach students.

Without the “green light” to implement a relatively untried tactic, developing an integrated curriculum based on student interest, Schultz would not have been able to present the students what turned out to be a rich learning experience.

- **Resources** – To perform the activities that helped deepen the student’s learning experience (creating a website for their campaign, making trips to lobby elected officials, creating outreach materials, etc), the students needed computers, funding, and access to administrative materials (eg, paper, printing facilities, phones, fax machines). Although many schools suffer from funding cuts and too few supplies, this case shows the potential of innovative use of materials and what is possible if teachers and schools are presented with sufficient resources and use them wisely.
- **Community interaction** – Integral to the success of the campaign undertaken by the students and Schultz was the opportunity to interact and create synergy with the community surrounding the school. Outreach to media and community residents (new and old) reinforced the relevance of the students’ campaign by offering others the opportunity to join or support the students’ work. This might have been the first time that students interacted positively with their community or vice versa and the young people acted as a catalyst for community change that the entire community could support. The effects of the classroom 405 campaign reached much farther than the school building: it presented a significant opportunity to galvanize a previously stratified community around a single cause that benefited everyone.

- **Parental support** – All too often, the parents of students in neighborhoods like Cabrini Green only hear negative comments about their children. Receiving phone calls from school was rarely a good thing. In the case of classroom 405 however, there were many reasons to laud students' work, which translated into phone calls with a more positive tone. Children improved academically, behaviorally and worked very hard to improve their community, news that any parent would love to receive. Projects like the one described in this case provide opportunities for positive parental interaction with the school and lead to increased investment in the education of their children.
- **Caring and hardworking teachers** – Although the work of the students and their achievement is the focal point of the story, the dedication, hard work and passion demonstrated by the teacher made it possible. Schultz took significant risks (i.e., trying to teach children in an unorthodox manner, to the dismay of some of his colleagues) in supporting the interests of his students and went to great lengths to acquire resources to create the curriculum used in the class. Perhaps more than any other element, the dedication and resourcefulness of the teacher, and his ability to establish a good rapport with his students, were necessary to bring out the best in the students of classroom 405.



## **Chapter 3 - Conclusion**

## Conclusion

This section summarizes three of the successful approaches used by the schools analyzed in this paper. These approaches have been proven to work in combating some of the seminal issues confronted by urban schools. These lessons, while effective in improving student achievement, are not a panacea for the poor performance of many urban schools nor are they meant to provide a “recipe” for a highly effective school. Rather, they are simply *some* of the tactics or practices used by *some* schools or school districts to help students achieve and graduate. Though there is clearly a dearth of high performing urban public schools, many more exist than were studied for this paper. Each of these schools has lessons that can help educators and school leaders improve the performance of students. The practices discussed in this section can be combined with the lessons to be found in other successful urban schools to create true, comprehensive improvement.

The cases profiled in this paper identify characteristics of learning environments proven to be successful in improving student achievement and ultimately helping more students graduate. Although the learning environment experienced by students is comprised of many elements, the cases discussed in this paper indicate that teachers are at the center of or heavily influence practices that improve student graduation rates. Through their unique ability to influence many aspects of the learning environment and their relative autonomy within their classrooms, teachers play a key role in the plight of students. This latitude provides teachers increased flexibility in their approach to instruction and shaping the learning environment. It also makes teachers more agile than entire schools or districts, as teachers can adjust their teaching style, curricula and pace in

“real time” based on the feedback and results from students. Within their classroom, teachers are also able to develop a separate culture that departs from the dominant culture of the school. Through different classroom based initiatives, like alternative reward and punishment structures, teachers are able to counteract the sometimes toxic environment in schools. These interventions can often overcome other environmental factors like a rundown school building or poor relationships between students and other school staff. Once children enter the classroom, they are in a separate and tightly controlled ecosystem, governed nearly completely by the teacher.

Unfortunately, it typically takes at least two years for new teachers to learn some of the lessons employed by effective veteran educators (Goldhaber and Anthony 2003). During this significant lag time within the learning process for educators, students are not educated in the most effective manner. Student performance suffers as a result. The intention of aggregating the lessons extracted from the cases in this paper and linking them to specific issues is to shorten the lag time between when a new teacher first enters the classroom and when that same teacher becomes most effective. By providing approaches and practices that have been used successfully by others, new teachers will be able to access and implement the hard won lessons used by educators in the schools studied for this paper. This will allow fledgling teachers to start their careers stronger and begin serving students better and earlier. Years of practice do not directly equate to expert teaching ability however. In the case of less effective veteran teachers, these lessons can act as a guide for the modification of teaching practices and adjustments of the classroom (and school) learning environments. Regardless of the teacher’s tenure, implementing some or all of the lessons from these cases can improve the learning

environment and ultimately increase the quality of the education provided to students attending urban schools.

## **Lessons**

**Lesson one** – Successful urban schools demand that students reach high standards and provide the support necessary for youth to meet those standards.

**Issue** – Pervasive student underachievement in urban schools.

At each of the schools profiled in this paper, successful students benefited from teachers who demanded high quality work from students. These work standards were the norm for students in these learning environments, regardless of the students' circumstances. Indeed, for KIPP charter schools, the entire school model is based on maintaining a “no excuses” culture within the school. Under this framework, neither teachers nor students are allowed to blame sub-par work or scores on debilitating extracurricular elements like poverty or parental education. Students are taught that, with hard work and dedication, they can overcome these factors. The “no excuses” culture tacitly states a faith in the ability of all students to perform at high levels. For many students, specifically those that attend poor performing urban schools, entering a “no excuses” environment may be the first time they are told that they can excel at anything. All too often young people from urban environments are deemed incapable of higher levels of achievement because of their home communities or family lives. This is especially the case when teachers' backgrounds are dissimilar to students'; in this situation, teachers unfamiliar with the tribulations students must go through begin to accept mediocre performance, thinking that the submission of any work, regardless of quality, represents a triumph over circumstance. One of the schools featured in this paper,

the HLC, has a model that comes close to this relationship, without falling into the trap of allowing students to submit poor quality work and miss standards. Despite the significant emotional and experiential baggage that students bring to the school, they are pushed to achieve and excel in several ways, including academically. However, because of the fragile nature of some students' tenure in school, the HLC has taken an alternative approach, evaluating students holistically based on their emotional, social and academic development. These elements establish a balance, and academic progress is emphasized, although it is not the sole means by which students are evaluated.

Integral to the "no excuses" culture is consistent and strong support for students. Teachers in KIPP schools and the HLC make themselves available to students via cell phone and email, stay after school or arrive early to help students with assignments or difficult concepts, and take extra time to help students who are having difficulty. In interviews conducted at Jane Addams High School, students said that they appreciated the teachers who pushed them to work harder and would not accept poor quality work. According to students, these teachers also spent extra time explaining complex concepts to students and demonstrated patience when working with students who initially did not understand the material. Both of these elements, the demand of high quality work and the support necessary to meet that standard, were factors cited by students as things that helped them stay in school and succeed.

There are two essential elements to creating successful environments that demand students meet high standards: 1) an objective, impersonal approach to student performance, and 2) a strong interpersonal connection between teachers and students. At first glance, these two traits seem antithetical, but they are not. They can actually be

mutually reinforcing. Teachers not allowing students to blame other factors for low quality work evidences the first aspect, the objective, impersonal approach to student performance. The teacher demands the same level of performance from each student, regardless of circumstance and extracurricular factors. These standards are universal and objective. Excuses are not allowed within this approach, only hard work and results, and each student is thought capable of reaching the high standards set for her or him. The second trait, a strong interpersonal connection between teachers and students, ensures that teachers are aware of and take into account the extracurricular factors that play a role in student performance. The factors are acknowledged as strong influences in a student's academic performance. However, the extracurricular factors are not thought of as immutable nor are they considered determinative of a student's success. Demonstrating cognizance of these factors, the teacher may provide extra help or resources to the student to offset their influence on student achievement. This could take the form of extra study time, more personalized attention or referrals to social service providers. The standard that the child must meet is not reduced though; the teacher simply provides extra support to help the child achieve.

**Examples of this approach include:** KIPP Charter Schools; Portland Public Schools; The High School Learning Center at Lawrence High School; Jane Addams High School.

**For more information on how to create a high standards environment and provide support for students, see the following articles:**

1. Teacher Expectations, Classroom Context, and the Achievement Gap

2. Higher Expectations Challenge Teachers and Students to Succeed
3. Social and Academic Expectations about High School for At-Risk Rural Youth
4. Classroom Interactions: Exploring the Practices of High- and Low-Expectation
5. Improving Schools Study: Another Way To Look at Raising Student Achievement (A Preliminary Study) (1997; Pardini 2007; Rubie-Davies 2007; Stein and Hussong 2007; McKown and Weinstein 2008)

**Lesson two** – Successful schools use relevant and purposeful curricula.

**Issue** - Student disengagement with learning material.

As reported in the Gates Foundation survey (Bridgeland, Dilulio et al. 2006), the number one cause for dropping out of school cited by youth is boring curricula. To keep students engaged, some of the schools profiled in this paper used “relevant curricula.” Schools defined this term differently. In some cases, schools created opportunities for students to tackle real community based or social issues. In other cases, students prepared materials they would need for entrance into the job market or college, actively preparing students for their post-high school endeavors.

Under the first definition of relevant curriculum, students were tasked with identifying issues that existed within their community or society, forming an understanding of the issue, creating an action plan to remediate the issue and executing that plan. Throughout these steps, students interacted with their community and the “real world” through project-based learning, which increased community and parental involvement with the school. These curricula were also purpose-driven, and real, tangible goals were set for students. In the case of Byrd Community Academy, students undertook

an advocacy campaign designed to draw attention to their school's state of disrepair.

According to the classroom teacher, based on their involvement in this year long project, students' grades and standardized test scores increased, as did their attendance. Presented with a real problem, the students poured themselves into creating and effecting a plan to improve their school. Many of the students attended school or gathered independently on Saturdays or before school each morning to work on their campaign.

Schools that used the second definition of relevant curriculum had students actively prepare for their next immediate position, either applying to and entering college or the workforce. Students took part in classes on resume preparation, the college application process, job interviewing skills and career planning. These classes were devised to provide students specific training for the exact hurdles they would have to overcome in order to achieve success in the next phase of their lives. The High School Learning Center at Lawrence High School (HLC) created a college preparatory program that acquainted students with the college application process, took them to three college campuses in two states and had them practice drafting application essays as well. Another school profiled in this paper, Jane Addams High School, facilitated a similar program in addition to a program that had students attend to issues they identified in their community. Through both versions of relevant curriculum offerings, students were challenged with negotiating real obstacles to their progress in the form of a daunting and unfamiliar college application process or confronting an issue in their community. Based on student interviews conducted for this paper in the HLC and Jane Addams High School, the result of this kind of approach is increased student investment and engagement in school work.



In a world where youth are besieged by real-time information about social crises and worldwide dilemmas, school material must become more reality based. Although this theory has been in existence for some time (Freire 1970), little has been done to act on it and operationalize the concept. As demonstrated by schools like Byrd Community Academy, the HLC and Jane Addams High School, students invest more deeply in schoolwork whose results are tangible and relevant to resolving community and social issues or prepare students for life after high school. In other words, students become more engaged when they can see and feel the effect and purpose of their work.

**Examples of this approach:** Bryd Community Academy; The High School Learning Center at Lawrence High School; Jane Addams High School.

**For more information on developing relevant and purposeful curricula, see the following articles:**

1. Problematizing Neighborhood Renewal: Community, School Effectiveness and Disadvantage
2. Preparing Today's High School Students for Tomorrow's Opportunities
3. Students Can't Wait: High Schools Must Turn Knowledge into Action
4. A Social Justice Approach to Achievement: Guiding Latina/o Students toward Educational Attainment with a Challenging, Socially Relevant Curriculum (2006; Bottoms, Presson et al. 2006; Cammarota 2007; Angus 2009)

**Lesson three** – Successful learning environments anticipate dropouts and intervene before the student leaves school.

**Issue** – “Sudden” and high dropout rates in urban schools.

Dropping out of school is the final act of a process of disengagement with school (Rumberger 2004). Some believe that this process begins in elementary school, eventually culminating in high school (Black 2004; Bridgeland, Dilulio et al. 2006; Allensworth and Easton 2007; Neild, Stoner-Eby et al. 2008). Students leave school due to a number of shortcomings in the educational environment (Darling-Hammond 1995; Darling-Hammond 1998), a variety of personal reasons (Rumberger 2004), and familial pressures and responsibilities (Noguera 2008). Regardless of the reason that students leave school, this action does not occur suddenly. Rather, there are several warning signs that can identify students that are on the verge of dropping out. Schools that are able to identify these warning signs can work proactively to keep students in school by helping to remediate the factors that make students leave. Urban schools that are successful in reducing the rate at which students drop out take note of a student’s historical performance and create ways to help the student overcome potential barriers to high achievement. They do so by accounting for a child’s educational history and performance and crafting support systems to remediate shortcomings in either of these areas.

Such was the case with the Portland Public School system (PPS). Faced with the “sudden” onset of a dropout crisis, the PPS’ leadership devised indicators used to identify potential dropouts and created a multifaceted student support system that worked to counteract the pressures students faced. Indicators used as warning signs include the number of classes a student failed during eighth and ninth grades and the number of

absences in those same grades. Additionally, teachers individually assessed each student in eighth grade using a balanced analysis which accounted for life challenges (i.e., being a teen parent, abuse, learning disorders, family responsibilities, etc) and learning deficiencies as well as the student's assets. This information was then given to the high school the student was to enroll in the following year, allowing the high school to prepare to receive the student and accommodate her or his needs. The system designed and deployed in the PPS provided academic and social interventions for the students they identified as at risk of dropping out of school (for a description of the interventions, see the Portland Public Schools case in chapter two of this paper). After implementing the dropout identification program and the support system for students, many schools demonstrated remarkable declines in the number of students leaving school prematurely.

**Example of this approach:** Portland Public Schools.

**For more information on creating measures to identify and support potential dropouts, see the following articles:**

1. Evaluation of Projects Funded by the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program
2. At-Risk Students Three Years Later: We Know Which Ones Will Drop Out
3. Academic Growth Group and Mentoring Program for Potential Dropouts
4. Identifying Potential Dropouts: Key Lessons for Building an Early Warning Data System. A Dual Agenda of High Standards and High Graduation Rates

5. Presentation of Social and Academic Factors That Encourage Persistence in Secondary Schools in Rural, Low Socioeconomic Areas of Two Selected Southeastern States
6. Early Identification and Intervention of Navajo Students At Risk for Underachievement (Frazer 1991; Blum and Jones 1993; Rossi and et al. 1995; Everett and et al. 1997; Jordan and Tempest 1998; Jerald 2006)

## Epilogue

In 2002, Ms. M<sup>13</sup> was a first year teacher in a Bronx high school. She was energetic and passionate about her work with young people and hardworking in the classroom. She was white, in her early twenties and from the Midwest, and thus faced a steep learning curve in trying to reach her students, a group of Black, Latino and Albanian kids, mostly from the Bronx. The school was tough, reputed to be the place where a teacher was once thrown from a window. Gangs had long since divided the school and each group controlled certain floors or sections of the building. Most of the social divisions within the building, of which there were many, ran along ethnic lines. The school was also known for its near universal poor academic achievement. Many students failed multiple classes and were held back, resulting in a high number of fifth year students and young people whose chronological age did not match their grade level (i.e., a seventeen year old freshman).

In her role as an English teacher for freshmen, Ms. M tried very hard to forge connections with her students. She used different techniques that she believed would help bridge the cultural gap between her and them. She would speak to them in different ways, sometimes being more friendly and at other times being more assertive. None of her techniques worked; students consistently ignored her and continued doing whatever they wished. By the time that I entered Ms. M's classroom in October of the same year, she was struggling to maintain the attention of some of the students, losing her patience with the class and questioning her resolve to become an effective teacher.

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<sup>13</sup> The teacher's name has been omitted to preserve confidentiality.

The day that I met Ms. M, she was teaching in a computer lab, with 30 students each seated in front of individual computers. She was hard at work trying unsuccessfully to dissuade them from scouring the Internet for the newest and coolest sneakers or the latest gossip on the day's R&B singing sensation. She was failing mightily. As I was introduced to the class, some of the students looked and noticed someone different in the front of the room. Little about their activities changed over the course of that period, despite my most ardent attempts to make them focus on me. This was my first assignment as a new staff member at a youth development nonprofit organization. Fresh out of college, I was asked to enter a classroom that appeared to be in disarray, bring it to order and engineer a turn-around in student academic performance, all in one semester. I, like Ms. M, had little formal classroom experience at the time and was unfamiliar with that specific school. Despite strong similarities between the communities in which the students and I were raised and similar trials we had braved, I felt as foreign to the students as Ms. M actually was. At one point, close to desperation, I stood on top of a desk in the classroom, hoping that my increased height would get the students to pay attention. That worked, but only momentarily. In the next instant, the students went back to their personal projects on the computers and resumed their side conversations (although after my stunt, they discussed the crazy teacher in the classroom instead of gossiping about classmates).

Over the course of that school year, Ms. M and I developed as teachers and classroom leaders. We learned how to bring boisterous groups to order and make them focus on the tasks at hand. We learned about what it took to motivate students in that school and get them to apply themselves to academics. And we learned how to create a

classroom culture that reinforced those ideas. At the risk of being boastful, I'd like to say that we became quite successful as teachers as well. The post-program evaluations corroborated the perception of our success: nearly all of the participants posted increased attendance and all stated an increased awareness of opportunities for higher education available to them if they worked hard. Perhaps most significantly, many participants indicated that they had reevaluated their future goals and aspirations, setting their sights on college or a more challenging and fulfilling career that they previously thought was beyond their reach.

By the end of that semester, Ms. M and I were extremely comfortable in the classroom. After participating in our program, some of the students said that they were going to redouble their efforts at academic excellence, with the aim of continuing their formal education in college. Many members of that group of students expressed a strong understanding of our program's lessons. Though we focused on keeping students in school, acquainting them with the college application process, and tried to prepare students to compete for spots in competitive institutions, we had a number of ancillary goals as well. Most of these subsidiary goals were based on developing the student's perception of her or his potential and exposing them to some of the many options that they could exercise, if they worked hard in school. Many of our program participants were resigned to thinking that they were limited by external, debilitating factors like a poor community or parents who never made it past high school. Our students had internalized the pervasive and erroneous idea that their potential was constrained by their circumstance. As a result, few of them applied themselves to academic achievement. This lackadaisical approach to school in turn made some teachers think that students were

opposed to education and the hard work necessary to excel academically. As a result, those teachers rarely, if ever, demanded better from the students. The reality was, however, that students were never pushed to perform in the classroom, never held responsible for applying themselves, never told that they had amazing potential and were rarely provided the help necessary to overcome some of the serious hurdles that they faced.

Beginning teachers have it rough. Regardless of the amount of passion one brings to the job, there are some big hurdles that must be negotiated before a teacher can learn and implement practices that help her or his students perform well. For the rest of my career as a teacher and program director, I relied on the lessons that I learned during that first year in Ms. M's classroom. As I got more students to invest in their education, I became more adept at identifying the potential of new teachers based on their ability to command student respect and attention. At the same time, I grew somewhat disdainful when evaluating the performance of the teachers with whom I was paired to facilitate my organization's programs. Frequently, they were brand new teachers entering schools through programs that worked to supply newly minted teachers to high need and hard to staff schools. I began to think that these new teachers who were unable to lead their classrooms effectively, like Ms. M and I were unable to do years before, were a detriment to the students' education because students in their classrooms foundered academically. The schools that I worked in had overwhelming numbers of teachers with no experience, graduates of or participants in programs like Teach for America and the Teaching Fellows. By and large, despite their strong desire to make a change in the educations and lives of the young people placed in their classrooms, these educators were not able to get



their students on track and help them succeed. I began to wonder where the “good” teachers were, and why there were so few of them in the schools in which I worked.

These good teachers were the ones whose classes were the best behaved, achieved the highest and needed the least amount of correction. It seemed as though classroom management was never an issue for them, nor was getting students to submit work (and high quality work at that). These teachers were never flustered in class, never shouted at students and never had students with anywhere near the disciplinary problems that I saw in other classrooms. They were simply in control of their classes all of the time. And their students were much more participatory than in other classes. Their rapport with students was much better than many other teachers’, reflecting the fact that they were the most respected by students and the most experienced in the classroom.

But just as I had this realization regarding the ineffectiveness of new teachers and the great worth of veteran teachers, I began to see that extensive experience in the classroom did not equate to excellent teaching. In my experience, the majority of the older teachers that served in these poorer performing schools were more of a threat to student achievement than anything else, including new teachers. Many of these veteran teachers worked for their pension, not the benefit of the students, and they did so openly. They read newspapers in class while students talked to each other or on cell phones; they let students fight until one or both were bloodied, saying that the teachers’ labor contract did not mandate teacher intervention in certain situations. They were the last ones to arrive in the morning and the first ones to leave in the afternoon. Students unlucky enough to have one of these teachers always reflected the teacher’s lackadaisical attitude toward their schoolwork. Some of these teachers, a few of whom had been in classrooms

for one or two decades, openly spoke of student shortcomings, saying that some of the young people in their classrooms were hopeless or “going nowhere” and that working with these students was a waste of time.

The detracting effect of some veteran teachers and the uninspiring performance of new teachers left me in a quandary when considering the future of public school education for young people. It seemed that both sides of the teaching spectrum, both new and well-seasoned educators, offered little hope to students whose education, and thus their future, was dependent on teacher ability to effect an environment that encouraged student excellence. Although this belief was based on my experience in schools and classrooms all over New York City and Lawrence, Massachusetts and was supported by scholars and others, there were examples of teachers that, once on the job for a couple of years and supported and inspired by school staff, were able to help students realize some of their potential. In fact, I was an example, as was Ms. M, of what new teachers could become if given some time, guidance and support. The problem was (and still is) that surviving the first couple of years in many urban schools is truly an act of survival – new teachers are subjected to chaotic and poorly managed environments that exhaust energy and provide little in the way of structured learning for the beginning educator. Only the most strong-willed and talented of the bunch would make it through. Political savvy also played a role in helping some of these teachers get out of being assigned to the toughest classes.

Few teachers are afforded the necessary time and support to develop and learn the craft of teaching. The pressures of working in high stress environments and with low performing kids exact a significant toll on educators, resulting in high rates of turnover.

This stress- and failure-induced attrition is especially prevalent in programs like Teach for America and the Teaching Fellows. Many who enter the profession through these programs are placed in tough, under-performing schools that suffer from a number of maladies including inconsistent management and poor teacher support and training systems. The new teachers (and to a lesser extent the veterans that have remained dedicated to their students' development) who brave these elements and are able to grow into successful teachers despite the shortcomings of their schools are to be commended. They are also to be studied, as they and their experience hold many lessons that stand to benefit other educators, teacher training programs and ultimately, the students of urban schools. Some critics of programs like Teach for America and the Teaching Fellows argue that teachers who do not demonstrate the ability and talent to marshal students towards success should be removed. I disagree.

I think that these teachers and their plight represent the future of urban education. Their ability to help students placed in their charge develop intellectually and socially will in many ways dictate the future of entire urban communities. At present, many of the areas with the highest rates of crime and poverty in the country also have the lowest rates of average educational attainment. This can be changed, over time, by increasing the caliber of teachers hired by failing urban schools. If beginning teachers and the veteran teachers who have become ineffective in helping students achieve are trained to develop learning environments that demand student performance, shown ways to support students, told what the warning signs indicating a potential dropout are, then I believe that much of the poor performance urban schools are known for will diminish. This would set off a chain of events that would have a powerful impact on urban communities.

The improved schools would better educate students; those better educated students would then continue on to college in higher numbers or earn higher wage jobs that would enable a better standard of living for the students and their families. In time, the community would prosper and the cycle would begin anew. Though simplified, these elements are the building blocks of healthy communities, and the foundation of those healthy communities is sound educational opportunity.

This paper began as an exploration of what elements comprised successful classrooms and schools. Teacher quality and ability proved to be paramount amongst the many traits of successful learning environments. My hope is that, through this work, I have created something that allows new teachers (and some of the less effective but more experienced ones) and others involved in formal educational processes to learn some concepts and strategies to help students attending urban schools perform better. Although these interventions are only some of the many necessary to improve many struggling urban communities, giving teachers the training and support they need to help them become adept in the classroom quicker would have a long reaching and profound impact.

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