

**Turnaround Schools: *The Locke Transformation Project, A Model of Reform***

Green Dot Public Schools (“Green Dot”) is leading the charge to transform public education in California so that all children receive the education they need to be successful in college, leadership and life. As the largest non-profit charter operator in Los Angeles, Green Dot operates 19 successful charter high schools in the highest need areas of Los Angeles. With fully unionized certificated and classified school-site staff, Green Dot is proving public schools can do a far better job of educating students if they operate more effectively.

Alain Leroy Locke Senior High School was opened in 1967 in response to the Watts' riots. The school was created to provide families in South Los Angeles and Watts a safe and secure place for learning. Its focus was to have a comprehensive program to guarantee the intellectual, moral, and social development of all students. While the school was initially a source of pride for the community, Locke High School 40 years later became one of the worst performing schools in California.

<b>Locke: A Failing High School</b>	
9th Grade Students Attending 4-year Colleges	<5%
9th Grade Students Graduating "College-Ready"	<10%
% of Students Proficient in English	10.5%
% of Students Proficient in Mathematics	1.6%
2007 CA Dept. of Education API Score	511
<i>Data Source: CDE Website</i>	

In 2007, the Locke High School staff voted to turn over governance of the school from the Los Angeles Unified School District (“LAUSD”) to Green Dot. Known as the Locke Transformation Project, this radical restructuring is one of the most innovative reform efforts in public education today. It is a one-of-a-kind partnership between a non-profit charter operator (Green Dot), the stakeholders (teachers, parents, community leaders) of a public high school, and a school district (LAUSD). The effort to transform Locke High School is unique for its bold goals and pioneering approach to secondary school reform.

**Systemic Problems at Locke**

The South Los Angeles and Watts community has been entrenched in poverty, crime, and gang rivalries for decades. Locke High School serves a 99% minority student population with 95% qualifying for free and reduced lunch.<sup>1</sup> For students looking for a safe haven inside the school, what they have found is a microcosm of the neighborhood. With more students dropping out than graduating from high school, there have been three fundamental systemic issues contributing to the school’s poor performance:

**1. Antiquated School Design:** Locke was opened as a comprehensive high school with the purpose of educating students of all abilities, allowing them to choose their own path. However, the comprehensive high school model has proven to be outdated and ineffective especially in low-income urban areas. The large student population lacks the personalization that students require. By 2007, only 28% of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students were graduating from Locke four years later.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the comprehensive high school design inhibits school leaders from making a significant impact on student achievement. With over 100 teachers, it is difficult to create a true professional learning community that provides all students with rigorous and differentiated instruction. Additionally, the large teaching staff makes it difficult for school leaders to provide professional development and instructional feedback necessary to deliver sound pedagogy.

**2. A Culture of Low Expectations:** Low expectations permeated Locke High School. Students were being tracked and those that did not show academic potential were quickly placed into vocational classes. It is estimated that less than 10% of Locke students were enrolled in the right A-G courses to even apply to a 4-year college or university.

<sup>1</sup> Green Dot student information system (PowerSchool), SY2008-2009.

<sup>2</sup> <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

### **Missing a College Going Culture**

From 2002-2006, a UCLA study examined the college going culture at Locke High School. The study found that there was a mismatch between student and teacher expectations. While students generally had high expectations of themselves, teachers tended to be more pessimistic regarding their expectations of students. When asked what they expect to be doing after high school, the majority of students believed they would go on to a 4-year college or university and perceived that teachers, counselors, family, and friends supposed the same. However, when teachers and staff were asked what they believed students would be doing after graduation, the most popular response was “immediately looking for employment” followed “by attending a community college.”

Creating a college going culture requires a commitment from all adults and a belief that everyone is a college counselor. Teachers, counselors and parents are the three main groups that students look at to talk to about college. Although students indicated that they look to talk to counselors first about college, more than one-third (34%) of Locke students indicated they do not talk to counselors at all about college.

*Source: Slocum, Jenee & Nicole Gerardi, Locke High School College Going Culture Survey Report, December 2006*

**3. Inability to Attract and Retain the Highest Quality Teachers:** High quality school leaders and teachers often choose to work at schools with more resources, parent involvement, and a safe environment. Pre-existing bargaining agreements involving seniority rights and onerous due process procedures prevented principals from attracting the best talent, removing ineffective teachers and overall, ensuring the right teachers were in front of the students. By 2007, only 10.5% of Locke students were scoring proficient or advanced in English while that number fell to 1.6% for math scores.<sup>3</sup>

Chronically failing schools have made attempts to improve. However, they are often inhibited by the lack of flexibility afforded to them by their districts and unions leading the schools to focus their efforts on incremental, programmatic changes. Unfortunately, programmatic changes lack comprehensiveness and often suffer from implementation through compliance rather than buy-in. This results in an inability to build capacity. Even if programmatic changes are implemented correctly, studies have shown that these types of changes only lead to small gains in improvement, not the dramatic gains that are needed to truly turnaround a failing school.<sup>4</sup>

### **Creating a Successful Turnaround**

In order to combat the systemic problems plagued by a failing school, there are four essential elements required for a successful turnaround. All four elements must be implemented simultaneously and comprehensively in order to be effective. Furthermore, there are three key implementation strategies that should be used to achieve the essential elements: school incubation through the *Phase-in by Grade* model, an alternative governance structure that can create flexibility from district policies and bargaining agreements for a failing school, and a performance-based accountability system to ensure the school will continually improve.

#### ***Four Essential Elements Required for a Successful Turnaround:***

1. **Implement a Small Schools Model:** A small schools model allows for personalization. No school should be larger than 500-600 students. At that size, teachers differentiate instruction and interventions to prevent students from slipping through the cracks. Furthermore, school leaders can focus on professional development and providing quality instructional feedback to a staff of 25-30 teachers.
2. **Ensure A-G Education for all Students:** The average college graduate earns \$1 million more over a life time than the average high school graduate.<sup>5</sup> All students must be enrolled in a college prep curriculum and all adults must have an unwavering belief in all students' potential to go to college.

<sup>3</sup> <http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2008>

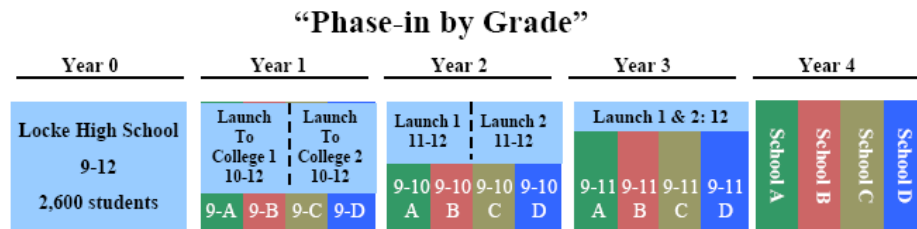
<sup>4</sup> Calkins, Andres, William Guenther, Grace Belfiore, Dave Lash, *The Turnaround Challenge: Why America's best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst-performing schools* (Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/american\\_community\\_survey\\_acs/001802.html](http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/american_community_survey_acs/001802.html)

3. **Implement a Portfolio Approach:** The comprehensive school model must be reimaged to allow for the small schools model while offering choice. This can be done by offering credit recoupment programs, career technical education, and academic and behavioral intervention programs at various small schools while still maintaining a college preparatory focus.
4. **Gain Full Human Resources Autonomy:** Teachers must want to be in the classrooms they are teaching in. There must be an efficient process to support ineffective teachers or move them out. Reconstituting staff, where all teachers are required to reapply for their jobs, should be considered to ensure the highest quality teachers are providing rigorous instruction at the turnaround school. At Locke, all of these measures were implemented with unionized certificated and classified staff, refuting the notion that bold human capital initiatives cannot be accomplished within the collective bargaining framework.

**Three Key Implementation Strategies:**

First, the **Phase-In by Grade** model provides the best conditions for local school empowerment and dramatic change in school culture. In the *Phase-In by Grade* model, the new 9<sup>th</sup> grade class is divided into multiple small schools of approximately 150 students each. Each school has its own principal, its own set of classrooms with clear school boundaries, and its own County-District-School (CDS) code for individual school accountability.



All schools are college-focused with A-G classes required of all students. Some schools have additional focused interventions for English Language Learners and students with special needs, while other schools pair college preparation with career technical education providing families and students with more choice. In the *Phase-In by Grade* model, each school takes on a new 9<sup>th</sup> grade class of 150 students until it is a full 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade school with approximately 500-600 students.

While the new 9<sup>th</sup> grade students are being acclimated to high school in small environments, the returning 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders are split up into two to three *Launch to College* academies of 500-600 students each. Similar to the new 9<sup>th</sup> grade academies, these schools will have focused interventions for those students who need extra support. However, greater support will be needed as many students may have lost precious years of high school under the failing school and need additional courses to ensure fulfilling the A-G requirements for college. Each returning student should have his/her records analyzed thoroughly and a path towards graduation should be mapped out to ensure success, even if it takes additional time to graduate. As students graduate each year from the *Launch to College* academies, the schools will shrink and combine with the other *Launch to College* academies maintaining a size of approximately 500-600 students until the final class graduates.

In addition to the *Phase-In By Grade* model and the *Launch to College* academies, two other interventions were determined to be necessary in the mix of schools at Locke. First, a substantial number of students were found to be credit deficient. The regular classroom would not be able to meet their needs. A credit recoupment program was initiated to allow students to make up needed credits and graduate at their own pace. Second, a number of students were returning to school from the juvenile courts. These students are placed in a smaller setting (class size of 15-20 students) with an intensive focus on literacy and math instruction before being acclimated back to the regular campus.

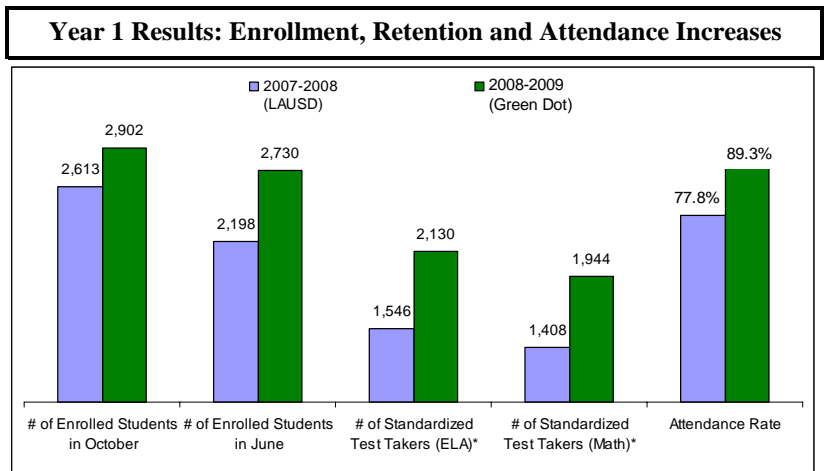
**Second, an alternative governance structure** is important to successfully implement a turnaround. The failing school must be freed from restrictive bargaining agreements and regressive district norms around staffing, curriculum, professional development and school budgeting. Creating autonomy for a failing school can be accomplished via charter school law, through district partnerships with modified collective bargaining agreements, and state waivers.

**Third, applying performance-based accountability** ensures checks and balances for a failing school. Student achievement levels as well as other accountability measures must be tracked over time. Schools that are not performing at an acceptable level will trigger interventions. The oversight and renewal process for charter schools is a model example of performance-based accountability. In California, the performance of charter schools are reviewed annually and low performing schools can have its charter revoked every five years.

**Results**

Research shows that it takes several years of implementation to see significant impact at turnaround schools, especially at the high school level.<sup>6</sup> Interim goals such as attendance rates, credit accumulation, and number of students on track to graduate can be used as indicators to ensure the school is on the right path. The results after the first year at Locke have proven promising.

Foremost, student enrollment, retention and attendance increased dramatically in the first year. By spring of 2009, Green Dot had retained approximately 500 more students than LAUSD had the previous year at Locke<sup>7</sup> and tested 38% more students. Attendance increased by more than 10% and reached upwards to 95% on standardized testing days. Additionally, parent and student surveys indicate that stakeholders feel safer and more supported. Students interviewed about the changes between the prior year and the first year stated, "The teachers care a lot more...they ask you things, like whether you're OK, and do you understand what they taught."<sup>8</sup> "Teachers do not ask if we are going to college; they ask us which college we will be attending."<sup>9</sup>



\*Only students in grades 9-11 are administered the standardized tests.

Survey Statement	Parent Survey			Student Survey		
	The school provides a safe environment for my child.	My child is gaining access to a better education than at a traditional public school.	The school works well with me, other parents, and the community to improve the school.	If I had a personal problem, there is at least one adult I could go to for help.	The discipline policy is clear and carried out fairly.	School spirit is evident among students, faculty and admin.
% Strongly Agree & Agree	87%	86%	90%	75%	70%	73%
# of Respondents	319	316	320	1061	1064	1065

<sup>6</sup> Tucci, Tara N., *Whole-School Reform: Transforming the Nation's Low-Performing High Schools* (Alliance for Excellent Education, July 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Data obtained by comparing number of active students in LAUSD's student information system in 07-08 and Green Dot's student information system in 08-09.

<sup>8</sup> LA Times Editorial Staff, "Locke High School's Progress," *The Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Comment from student stakeholder feedback.