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Turnaround Strategies at an Underperforming Urban Elementary School: An Examination of Stakeholder Perspectives

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Turnaround Strategies at an Underperforming Urban Elementary School:

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by

Angela Watkins Bass

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

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An Examination of Stakeholder Perspectives

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This dissertation written by Angela Watkins Bass, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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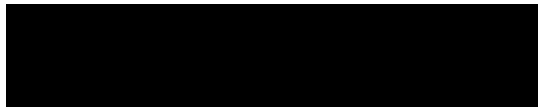
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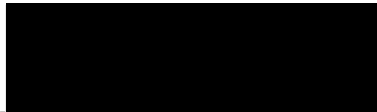
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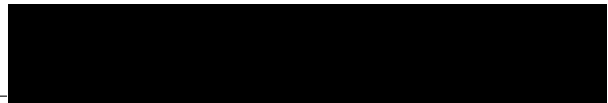
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my loving mother and father, CMSGT Willie M. Watkins and Birdell Watkins who were the best parents ever. They are my inspiration every day because they provided a loving and caring home and they had a vision for me and my siblings to love God and family and to give our personal best. They modeled that education is the gateway to success and freedom.

I also dedicate this work to my ancestors, my grandparents, Louie and Mamie Johnson, Lillian Nichols, Aunts Cecealia Watkins Lee, Geneva Smith and Carolyn West; my great grandparents, Joanna Payne Green, Ike Hughes, Birdie and Henry Smith, who all placed God and family first. They lived with purpose and walked with dignity, hope, and love even through the struggle. They each had such a commitment to American values and pursued the American dream. I know that I am who I am only because they led the way and I now stand on the shoulders of their great works.

I also pay special homage to my great grandmother, Joanna Payne Green, born in 1890 in Natchez, Mississippi. Although she only had a fourth grade education, she served, saved, and fed her community during the depression. Through her service she kept many families alive, and, as a result, there is now a community with doctors, teachers, and lawyers. Her courage, selflessness, and call to serve her community are values that I strive to attain everyday.

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ABSTRACT

Turnaround Strategies at an Underperforming Urban Elementary School:

An Examination of Stakeholder Perspectives

By

Angela Watkins Bass

In August of 2007, Los Angeles Unified School District embarked on a new journey under the leadership of Superintendent David Brewer toward improving the achievement of some of Los Angeles' lowest performing schools. By establishing a partnership with the Mayor of Los Angeles, Antonio Villaraigosa, the goal of the improvements was to form a team of talented and experienced educators who would identify schools whose majority of teachers would be willing to be led and supported by these experienced educators under an umbrella organization called the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools in agreement with United Teachers of Los Angeles. The Deputy Mayor, Ramon Cortines, recruited me, the researcher of this study, to serve as Superintendent of Instruction of the Partnership in February of 2008.

For two and a half years, I, along with 28 team members worked tenaciously to develop and implement a model that would accelerate achievement. While there were numerous initiatives and programs attempting to improve student performance in the lowest performing schools, no initiative in the district alleviated teachers from the day-to-day constraints of district policies and procedures. The reform model developed by the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools was the focus of this research. An analysis of the implementation of the Partnership Model at one particular site, Excellence Elementary

School, yielded results that examined if the Partnership Model was able to successfully

transform outcomes in an underperforming school.

CHAPTER I: BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In August of 2007, under the leadership of Superintendent David Brewer Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) embarked on a new journey toward improving the achievement of some of Los Angeles' lowest performing schools by forming a partnership with the Mayor of Los Angeles, Antonio Villaraigosa. The goal was for the Mayor to form a team of talented and experienced educators who would, in agreement with United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), identify schools whose majority of teachers would be willing to be led and supported by these experienced educators under an umbrella organization called the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools (PLAS), also referred to as the Partnership Model. The Deputy Mayor for Education, Youth, and Families, Ramon Cortines, recruited me to serve as Superintendent of Instruction of PLAS in February of 2008.

For two and a half years, I, along with 28 talented team members, worked tirelessly to design, develop, and implement a model that would accelerate achievement. While numerous initiatives and programs were attempting to improve student performance in the lowest performing schools, no initiative in the district sufficiently freed teachers from the day-to-day constraints of district policies and procedures so they could concentrate fully on teaching and raising student achievement. The reform model developed by PLAS sought to do so, and it was the focus of this research. This qualitative case study looked at the case of one successful turnaround school to better understand the strategies for school improvement. Piloted by the Partnership Model, this

study may be utilized and taken to scale in school systems where similar populations are experiencing school failure.

Public schools in the United States have failed to adequately educate poor and minority children to be successful in college and post-high school careers (Kettering Foundation, 2007). Evidence exists of persistent failure to educate students in the lowest performing schools. For example, at the time of this study in California more than 1,200 schools were in year five or more of Program Improvement (PI/5), and in Los Angeles alone 397 Program Improvement schools enrolled more than 440,000 students (Los Angeles School District [LAUSD], 2011-2012). The Brown Center on Education Policy in its 2010 report on American Education (Loveless, 2010) included an analysis of California's lowest performing schools and found that of the schools in the lowest quartile in 1989—the state's lowest performers—nearly two-thirds (63.4%) scored in the bottom quartile again in 2009. The odds of a bottom quartile school moving to the top quartile during that 20-year period were about 1 in 70 (1.4%). Additionally, examples of large-scale, system-wide school district turnarounds have been nonexistent in California. Based on these statistics, this qualitative study provides an important examination of the success and increased achievement at one school, Excellence Elementary School, under the Partnership Model. This study explored the key strategies developed by the Partnership Model that influenced school success, in order to provide data and strategies that could be replicated at other schools in similar settings.

The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools as a Nonprofit Organization

PLAS was a nonprofit organization committed to the transformation of Los Angeles public schools so that all children in Los Angeles could graduate from high school prepared for college and careers. Launched by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa in collaboration with LAUSD in 2008, PLAS served and supported some of the schools with the greatest need in Los Angeles, and continued to do so after the conclusion of this study. Bringing together a wide cross-section of groups, individuals, and assets in Los Angeles, PLAS was created to accelerate student achievement in schools throughout Los Angeles by supporting teachers, principals and school staff in a new way, and by serving as a catalyst for change in LAUSD. Figure 1 provides a timeline of the development and implementation of PLAS.

Timeline of School Transformation in LAUSD:

The Emergence of the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools
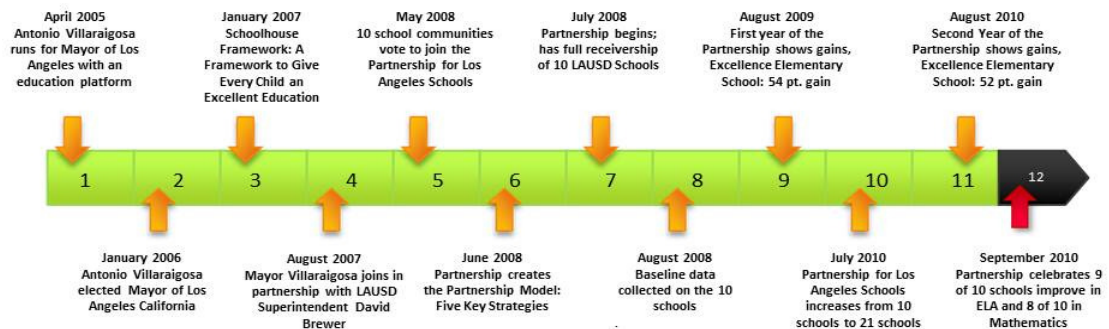
Figure 1. Timeline of development and implementation of PLAS (Bass, 2010)

The Partnership Model: A Framework for School-Wide Change

The model that was examined in this research, referred to as the Five Key Strategies of Education Transformation (also referred to as the Five Key Strategies), was

a product of the work of the Mayor's appointed team of experts and of PLAS. PLAS designed and developed the Partnership Model as part of its commitment to the transformation of schools in LAUSD. The Partnership Model was used specifically and strategically in the successful turnaround of the Excellence Elementary School, the subject of this dissertation. This research explored how and why the Partnership Model produced accelerated gains in the Excellence Elementary School. Bass, Shen, and Balakian (2009) established that the Partnership Model made the following assumptions about the participating schools and leadership:

- Solutions exist within our schools.

- Local capacity building and empowerment among all stakeholders is essential to school improvement.

- Customized instructional plans are necessary in order to meet the unique needs of individual schools.

- Rigorous internal and external accountability ensures progress.

- Strategic and flexible spending will allow for site-based decision making.

- Executive Coaching with site leadership is critical to school success.

- Underperforming schools require a different delivery-service model in order to accelerate school performance.

During the time the Partnership Model was in place, the test scores improved at 8 of the original 10 schools that participated. This study focused specifically on the results from Excellence Elementary School.

Purpose of the Study

Excellence Elementary was one of the high achieving PLAS Schools, as measured by increases in API. Interviews of key informants who were a part of the turnaround process, participants' observation journals, and archival data yielded a variety of perspectives about the turnaround. Using the stakeholder theoretical perspective, this study investigated what happened in the years since PLAS began its work at Excellence Elementary, including what challenges were addressed, what positive and negative reactions to the PLAS model existed, and what was learned from the model that could benefit other schools and districts.

The study also examined the extent to which the Five Key Strategies of the Partnership Model created the conditions for learning at Excellence Elementary School by increasing the quality of the work in individual classes, affecting the overall the quality of teaching and learning, and establishing an efficacious culture that could accelerate student performance. This study also focused on the systems and structures necessary in order to sustain best practices for long-term academic achievement and school-wide improvements. Ultimately, this case study sought to provide suggestions on how the Five Key Strategies could serve as a turnaround model for similar underperforming schools. Chapter III addresses the recommendations for this objective.

Significance of Study

Urban education has been increasingly scrutinized for its ability to increase academic achievement of ethnic minority and poor children. In the face of unprecedented challenges, large urban regions such as New York, Chicago, Boston, and Los Angeles

have struggled to achieve academic equity and access to a quality education for all students. In the Los Angeles region, PLAS schools have languished both academically and socially for the last three decades. The conditions of instructional practice have been greatly diminished due to the revolving door of principals and teachers over the years. In addition, the great number of new teachers with minimal experience and inadequate instructional tools and resources has been striving to educate the students with the greatest needs. Further, the demands of state and federal accountability on schools and a heartbreaking budget crisis have created an even greater challenge with the vast number of new teachers being laid off and displaced due to having a low seniority rate. Taken together, these factors have left schools in a frenzy to stabilize their staffs by utilizing teachers with emergency credentials and substitutes who arrive willing but not adequately prepared to teach students with extreme gaps in learning. These conditions in turn have left PLAS schools and many others seemingly devoid of the system's genuine commitment to ensure that they are able to establish themselves as viable school communities.

This study is especially significant because there has been an urgency to respond to the many challenges of urban education, epitomized by the challenges in the PLAS schools outlined above. The Partnership Model provides insight to the field as a potential reform model for similar schools given the successes documented in this study.

Schoolhouse Framework:

A Framework to Give Every Child an Excellent Education

In 2006, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa commissioned the McKinsey Group to develop a framework that would personify his vision for schools of excellence. The Schoolhouse Framework was designed to give every child in LAUSD an excellent education. "The Schoolhouse: A Framework to Give Every Child in LAUSD an Excellent Education" was anchored in a firm foundation of community support and resolve, and its ultimate aspiration was to create a system in which all children would receive an excellent public education to cement the opportunity to realize their dreams (Villaraigosa, 2006b). The Schoolhouse Framework was designed with pillars that would become the launching platform of expectations for PLAS schools. The six pillars were deemed essential to transforming underperforming schools, and they were titled: High Expectations; Safe, Small and Clean; Empowered Leadership; Powerful Teaching and Rigorous Curriculum; Family and Community Involvement; and More Money to Schools. Figure 2 illustrates the framework in detail.
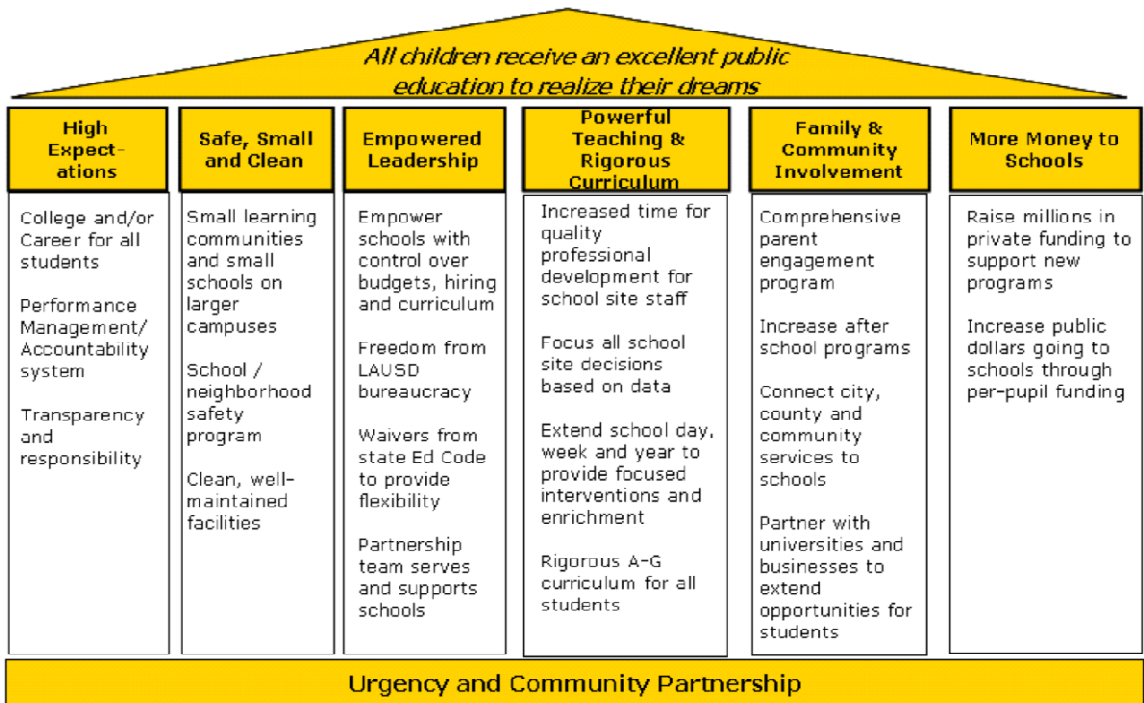
Figure 2. The Schoolhouse framework. *(The Schoolhouse: A Framework to Give Every Child an Excellent Education,* Villaraigosa, A., 2006b)

In August of 2007 Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa joined in a first ever partnership with Superintendent David Brewer and the LAUSD School Board by establishing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that allowed the Mayor and his team to have direct receivership of 10 failing schools in the district to provide a different level of oversight, flexibility, and support. In order to create the Partnership Model for school improvement, the PLAS team spent hundreds of hours of extensive interviews and focus groups with administrators, teachers, classified staff, parents, and students along with community members and organizations. In addition, the Superintendent of Instruction along with the instructional team conducted more than 750 classroom visits. I was part of the interview and observation process. My reflections on this process appear in professional journals, which were part of the archival data for this research.

The school community feedback and the extensive classroom visits became the backdrop that established a clear context for defining the Five Key Strategies of the Partnership Model. The PLAS leadership team interfaced with a host of local and national educational scholars, seeking their expertise and recommendations. This research revealed that there was a common thread in certain strategies and support that could help create successful school reform.

The Five Key Strategies of the Partnership Model

Members of PLAS set out to identify a family of schools within a community that agreed from preschool through high school with the goal to support and improve an entire school community. The PLAS team utilized all of its human capital and set out on a campaign to share the mayor's vision and mission to improve the quality of schools in Los Angeles. They also identified the numerous flexibilities, such as site-based budgeting, which would allow schools to have nearly total decision-making authority over site resources, such as staffing and additional resources that would be provided through PLAS. The original 10 schools voted in the spring of 2008 to become members of PLAS effective July 1, 2008, which was the first day of the 2008-09 school year. This was essential to the success of PLAS because it was important to have "buy-in" from the majority of the staff and the families in order to be able to lead and support the changes that needed to occur to improve each school's outcomes. Each school would only be accepted with the two agreed upon mandatory criteria: each school needed a 51% vote of the teachers' bargaining unit to join PLAS and the majority of the parent elections had to be in favor of joining too.

The PLAS leadership then hosted a series of focus teams at each school to interview administrators, teachers, classified staff, parents, and students in order to assess their strengths, needs, and concerns. The goal was to listen to the stakeholders and identify and customize a set of strategies that could be used to contextually meet their needs and those of the school communities. Five strategies were identified as the common threads from the original 10 schools, and they became known as the Five Key Strategies. The following sections provide an overview of how the Five Key Strategies, as developed by PLAS and informed by Mayor Villaraigosa's Schoolhouse Framework, were implemented at Excellence Elementary. Figure 3 provides an illustration of the Five Key Strategies.
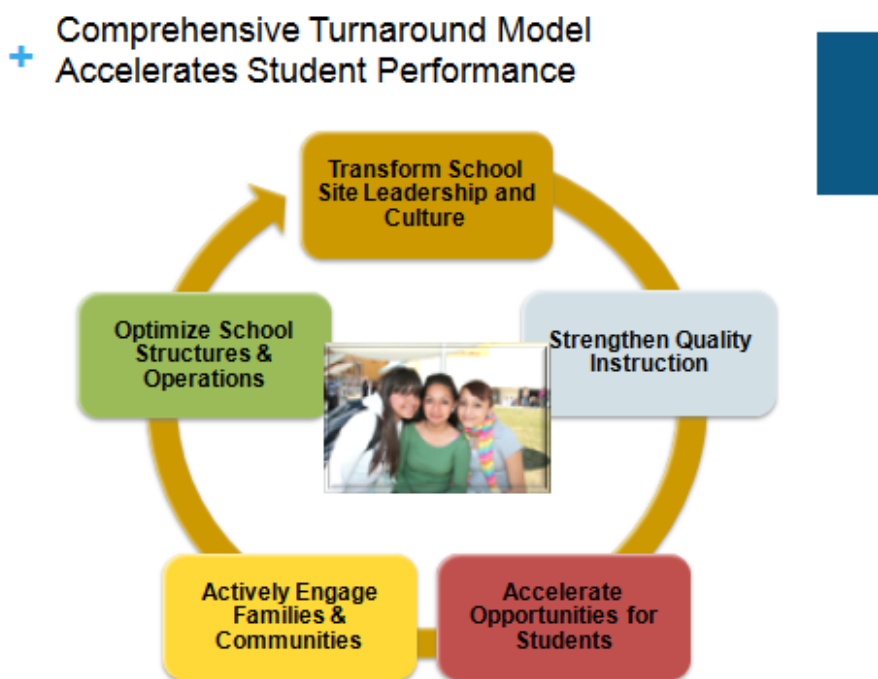
Figure 3. Comprehensive turnaround model using the Five Key Strategies (Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, 2008b).

Transform School Site Leadership and Culture

PLAS needed to hire new principals and new assistant principals because the trust in the leaders had diminished. Administrators were asked to spend three hours every day observing classrooms, while PLAS provided comprehensive leadership development training for all administrators. Further, PLAS attempted to improve the culture of teacher and student relationship through such programs as Capturing Kids Hearts (Bryk & Schnieder, 2002; Payne, 2008)

Strengthen Quality Instruction

PLAS needed to improve system-wide professional development through monthly coaching conference for teachers. Thus, PLAS provided ongoing conferences with a mini-conference series and summer institutes that would engage and empower teachers with curriculum and new teaching methodology and pedagogy. PLAS also decided to launch a data dashboard for data-driven decision-making and for training cohorts of teachers to access the curriculum (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).

Accelerate Opportunities for Students

Teachers needed to be able to access their student data on a daily basis, and PLAS required that the master schedule at each school site would be aligned with the standard-based *A-G* requirement in order to provide students equal access. It was clear as the data was reviewed that most students were chronically underperforming and that the students who were making the grade of proficiency had few programs to challenge them to reach their potential and to accelerate.

In order to address this concern, PLAS created and trained intervention teams at each elementary and middle school; launched targeted intervention programs at elementary, middle, and high school; developed high school programs for test prep for the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE); and developed a credit recovery program that provided opportunities to take on-line courses to make up for failed courses (Rathvon, 2008). In addition, Achievement Via Individual Determination (AVID) programs were launched and expanded at all middle and high schools to develop a high level of technical skills and motivation in students (Watt, Powell, & Mendiola, 2004); classroom libraries were purchased and established across all elementary school grades with the goal to put a laser-like focus on literacy at the early grades; and a pilot course titled Literacy for Leadership Class was established to support students reading far below grade level. Further, PLAS established an initiative to assess every second grade Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) student in order to identify gifted students in the early grades and to establish the necessary supports to meet their needs and provide training for more teachers to become GATE certified (Ford, 1994).

Actively Engage Families and Communities

It was clear from the focus groups that both staff and parents needed and wanted to play a more significant role in educating their children. PLAS identified action steps to address the needs of the school communities in the area, launching Family Action Teams (FAT) at all schools and becoming responsible for family engagement. PLAS also asked each school to identify activities and strategies to actively engage families and communities, and PLAS allocated resources and identified community and business

philanthropy to renovate parent centers (Westat & Policy Studies Associates, 2001). In addition, family engagement professional development programs were initiated, and teachers, families, and community members participated in family and community activities outside and inside the schools (Sanders, 1998).

Optimize School Structures and Operations

It was necessary to seek additional resources for the school, to inform the community of the critical condition of the schools, and to attain financial or in-kind resources that would benefit the students, staff, and families in the school community (Campbell, Harvey, & DeArmond, 2002). The ultimate goal was to build an entire community's accountability and responsibility for students and to establish the school as the hub of the community. In order to accomplish these goals, PLAS raised funds necessary to deliver on their agenda, altogether raising 50% of funding required. This funding raised awareness of PLAS successes through marketing and public relations built the foundation for timely and effective communications with school sites and within school sites.

Table 1 indicates that the Partnership Model for school transformation dramatically accelerated gains in student achievement in LAUSD in 2008-2010. More specifically, Excellence Elementary School, which was the subject of the research for this study, made significant gains. The objective of the Partnership Model was to drive dramatic gains in student achievement throughout LAUSD by leading the District to comprehensively implement the Five Key Strategies. In Excellence Elementary School, the Partnership Model was initially implemented in September of the 2008-2009 school

year. The specific focus of this study was to examine the influence of the Five Key

Strategies in creating the conditions for school success and in impacting school

performance.

Table 1

Two-Year Academic Performance Index (API) Growth of the Original 10 Partnership Schools, 2009-2010

School	2010 growth API	2010 growth	2009 growth	2-year growth	Met School wide/sub-group targets?
Elementary					
Excellence	773	52	54	106	Y/Y
I Elementary	708	-1	9	8	N/N
A Elementary	676	6	4	10	N/N
E Elementary	716	-17	41	24	N/N
Middle					
G Middle	549	-8	-1	-9	N/N
C Middle	625	9	33	42	Y/N
H Middle	570	46	-10	36	Y/N
D Middle	627	16	-7	9	Y/N
High					
B High	607	31	26	57	Y/N
F High	553	32	20	52	Y/N
Partnership	606	21	17		

(Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, 2008a. Business Plan)

Research Questions

An evaluation of the effectiveness of the Partnership Model was necessary to

determine what could be learned from the reflections of the community stakeholders of

Excellence Elementary School about the efficacy of the Partnership's Model's Five Key

Strategies used in the turnaround. It was also necessary to determine whether these were

the right key strategies and to define the stakeholders' perceptions of the Five Key

Strategies. Finally, it was critical to identify the lessons learned from turnaround that

could be useful to other reformers who may also pursue turning around underperforming schools.

The following questions guided this study:

1. What reflections do community stakeholders have about the efficacy of the Partnership Model's Five Key Strategies used for the turnaround at Excellence Elementary School?

2. Do stakeholders at Excellence Elementary believe these were the right strategies? Were they the most effective strategies?

3. What are the stakeholders' perceptions of the implementation of the turnaround strategies at Excellence Elementary?

4. What can be learned from the turnaround process at Excellence Elementary that may inform other turnaround projects?

Overview of Methods

This research was a case study that utilized qualitative research methods. The study focused on only one of the PLAS schools, referred to as Excellence Elementary School. The data collection and analysis included interviews and documentation review. School staffs, parents of students, PLAS personnel, and professional experts on turnaround schools were interviewed to ascertain information related to the implementation and effectiveness of the Partnership Model. The objective of this case study was to explore the reasons for the success of the Excellence Elementary School. A better understanding of the turnaround success will help to reveal the complexities of

school turnaround and can better inform other practitioners concerning to succeed in low-performing schools.

School Setting and Context

Excellence Elementary School was located in the south central region of Los Angeles, known as the Watts community. It was one of nearly 800 schools in the LAUSD of 620,000 students. The area was composed of longtime residents and single-family dwellings that became subsidized rental units. It was also a school community in which a number of parents and grandparents of students had attended Excellence Elementary School. The area of south central Los Angeles had both an older middle-income population and a low-income single-family population in residence. A number of small and large businesses were dispersed throughout the community, but due to the economy there were also numerous vacant buildings, an increasing homeless community, and effects in the area from crime and violence.

Excellence Elementary enrolled 490 students in pre-kindergarten through grade six in September 2008. Hispanic/Latino students made up 67% of the student population and 25% were African American. Of these students, 100% qualified to receive free lunches, 42% spoke a language other than English at home, and 97% students came from the neighborhood (LAUSD, 2009-2010).

Excellence Elementary School was selected because it was one of the 10 original schools to join PLAS that successfully implemented the Five Key Strategies of the Partnership Model most effectively and that yielded the greatest gains during the first two years. While recognizing that context matters in striving to turnaround chronically

underperforming schools, it was essential to address the roles of the Five Key Strategies in accelerating school achievement.

Rationale of the Qualitative Methods Approach

Qualitative research is a generic term for investigative methodologies described as ethnographic, naturalistic, anthropological, field, or participant observer research. It emphasizes the importance of looking at variables in the natural setting in which they are found. Detailed data are gathered through open-ended questions that provide direct quotations, and the interviewer is an integral part of the investigation (Jacob, 1998). The qualitative approach differs from quantitative research, which attempts to gather data by objective methods to provide information about relations, comparisons, and predictions, attempting to remove the investigator from the investigation (Smith, 1983).

The intent of qualitative research is to examine a social situation by allowing the researcher to enter the world of others and it attempts to achieve a holistic understanding of the context for the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Understanding the context of Excellence Elementary was key to exploring the success of the turnaround efforts at this site. Qualitative research allows the researcher to listen to individual voices and gain the richness of the participant's experiences over a strict analysis of quantitative data. Indeed, it was important to hear the voices of the community at Excellence Elementary School to determine perspectives about the turnaround strategy from the stakeholders at the school. Qualitative researchers want to know "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 1998, p. 5). This perspective of examining the meaning attributed to

experiences was critical to uncovering the reasons for the successful turnaround at Excellence Elementary. Additionally, listening carefully to all stakeholders and considering their experiences of schooling would be imperative to replicating this successful model.

The Case Study Method

Stake (1995) spoke of the choice of the *case* in case study as sometimes being no choice at all. That is, the compelling nature of the problem usually presents no other alternative to the researcher except that she must undertake a case study to explore the problem. This is called an intrinsic case study. My study of Excellence Elementary was rooted in my felt responsibility to find answers to the education crisis that plagues our city and our nation. By focusing on a case study of Excellence Elementary, I was fulfilling my responsibility to evaluate a program that could produce usable findings to aid other struggling schools. In addition, case studies are "non-interventive and empathic" (Stake, 1995, p. 12). In other words, I proceeded with the research as a participant observer, not disturbing the ordinary activity of the site during my observation and collecting additional data through interviews and unobtrusive data after the turnaround process had taken place.

Participant Selection

The participants were chosen through the use of a purposeful selection process based on the need to include teachers who were at the Excellence Elementary School prior to joining PLAS, teachers who began their tenure after PLAS took the helm, and input from the principal. Participants were chosen based on their direct leadership

responsibilities for improvement reform and because of their collective expertise in the field of turnarounds. The participants included the principal, four teachers, and two parents. In addition, interviews of the Assistant Superintendent of Instruction, the Coordinator of School Improvement Officer, and a researcher/expert on turnarounds of underperforming schools took place in person and via phone interview. The principal identified the four teachers and the two parents for the interviews. The two PLAS members were the two leaders who had been assigned direct supervision and support of Excellence Elementary School.

The following is a list of the interview participants, including the coding used to protect their anonymity.

- *Site Principal*: The site Principal was a 28-year employee of LAUSD. She had served as Principal at Excellence Elementary School for about 3 years. Prior experiences included more than a decade as a classroom teacher and literacy coach (Resource Teacher), and seven years as Vice Principal. In this study, she goes by the pseudonym Principal Johnson (PJ).
- *Site Teachers*: The principal selected four teachers to be interviewed. Two of the classroom teachers had been teaching at Excellence Elementary School for more than seven years and two teachers joined the staff after 2007. They were classified as either *veteran staff* or *new staff*.
- *Veteran Staff—Classroom Teacher #1*: Female teacher who had been teaching for approximately 12 years at Excellence Elementary School, primarily in the upper grades. This teacher is identified in this study by the initials TG.

- *Veteran Staff—Classroom Teacher #2*: Female teacher who had been teaching for more than 11 years at Excellence Elementary School as a primary grade teacher. This teacher is identified in this study by the initials TB.

- *New Staff—Classroom Teacher #1*: Female teacher who served as a resource teacher Literacy Coach and who had been teaching for more than 13 years. She joined the staff in September 2008. This teacher is identified in this study by the initials TW.

- *New Staff—English Learner Resource Teacher #2*: Female teacher who had been teaching for more than nine years in LAUSD. She joined the staff in September 2008. This teacher is identified in this study by the initials TC.

- *Excellence Elementary School Parents—Parent #1*: Latino female parent who put three children through the school. She served as volunteer on school committees and was actively involved for more than 10 years. This parent is identified in this study by the initials PG.

- *Excellence Elementary School Parents—Parent #2*: Latino female parent with several family members who had attended the school and who had become more active in the school over the past four years leading up to the study. This parent is identified in this study by the initials PM.

- *Assistant Superintendent of Instruction*: The Assistant Superintendent was a 39-year-old educator with more than 17 years in the field of education. He had served in many capacities in education, including as a classroom teacher, a principal, and as Director of Compensatory Programs. He served as the direct

supervisor, instructional, and operational leader for Excellence Elementary for two and a half years. The assistant superintendent is identified in this study by the initials AS.

- *Coordinator of School Improvement:* The Coordinator of School Improvement was a 12-year veteran in education who had taught in charter schools, worked at UCLA as an educational researcher, and served as the CSI for Excellence Elementary School, specifically supporting and assessing the instructional needs of the school for two years. The coordinator is identified in this study by the initials CSI.

- *Researcher, School Turnaround Expert*: The researcher was a 30-year veteran in education. He worked on multiple projects focused on underperforming schools and teacher quality, and participated in research projects funded by national foundations on school turnarounds in California and across the nation.

Data Collection Methods

Interviews.

The one-on-one interviews were semi-structured**,** allowing the researcher to engage in follow-up questioning when necessary. All interviews lasted approximately one hour, occurred during the personal time of the participants, not during working hours, and were audio taped with the permission of the participants. Some interviews were conducted on site, and others were conducted via phone. All participants were interviewed for the same amount of time and had an equal voice in co-constructing the story of Excellence Elementary. Each of the interview participants was coded with a

pseudonym for purposes of confidentiality. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Observational journals.

The Deputy Mayor, Ramon Cortines, recruited me to serve as Superintendent of Instruction of PLAS in February of 2008. For two and a half years, I, along with 28 team members, worked to develop and implement a model that would accelerate achievement. During this time I kept a journal as I observed, discussed, and planned with the stakeholders of Excellence Elementary. These journals provided observational data to expand upon perspectives provided by the stakeholder interviews. In one respect, I could consider myself a participant observer in this study. However, at the time I did not consider my journaling as part of a research plan. Thus, though my journals were an important artifact and I was a participant observer during the time of the study, I was *not* a researcher during this time; therefore, my journals may be best considered a type of archived data.

Archived data.

I used public data that was made available about the philosophy, process, and results of the turnaround process. These included the Tripod Report distributed to parents, teachers, and administrators at Excellence Elementary, California State Test (CST) scores, the School Accountability Report Card for Excellence Elementary, and the Schoolhouse Framework developed by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa with support from the consulting firm McKinsey & Co.

Internal Validity

Merriam (2009) said researchers involved in qualitative studies are unable to capture an objective truth or reality, though he did suggest some strategies that could increase the credibility of the research findings. The following sections delineate the methods that I used to increase the credibility of the findings from Excellence Elementary.

Triangulation.

Triangulation means using multiple sources of data and comparing and cross checking data collected through observations, interviews, and document analysis (Merriam, 2009). I triangulated my research findings by using three methods: (a) site observation, which was conducted at the time of the turnaround and recorded in observational journals through the process, (b) interviews of community stakeholders, and (c) review of relevant documents.

Member checking.

I also verified with interview participants that the information they provided was accurate by affording them the opportunity to change their input or decline participation in the study.

Researcher bias.

It was important to be clear about my positionality in the research. As Superintendent of Instruction of PLAS in February of 2008, I worked to develop and implement a model of what would accelerate achievement in underperforming schools. Excellence Elementary was an example of a successful turnaround that resulted from

those efforts. Thus, my vested interest in the project was clear. The success of the

project was also irrefutably based on the CST scores that followed the turnaround efforts.

My research was an empirical attempt to objectively collect data about how and why the

success came about.

Data analysis.

After interviews were completed, I developed a case study database (Yin, 2009)

and then coded the materials. Using the constant comparative method, I compared

segments of data to each other to determine similarities and differences. I sorted the

transcribed interviews and observational journal data into themes that appear as sections

in Chapter III. I also reviewed the public data sets for information that corroborated or

refuted the findings from the interviews and journal data.

Theoretical Perspective

In its philosophy, PLAS (2008) asserted that it used a collaborative approach to

turn around its schools, which required that all stakeholders, community members,

students, teachers, administrators, and districts *construct* together a school-learning

environment that would help all students succeed. Thus, the theoretical framework of

social constructivism actively guided my research. This framework suggested that the

learners, in this case the stakeholders and myself, were *information constructors*

(Woolfolk, Winne, & Perry, 2009). This was true for my research in two distinct ways.

First, the turnaround initiative as developed by PLAS had to proceed in a collaborative

manner, where all stakeholders had to continuously co-construct the experience and the

knowledge that would create the most effective turnaround strategy. Using each other as

resources, relying on past knowledge, and contextualizing the needs of students to ensure success, stakeholders constructed together a turnaround initiative that they felt best met their needs. This study explored stakeholders' reflections on that process, including its successes and failures. Second, through the interviews with stakeholders who participated in the turnaround, I co-constructed with them an analysis that would provide answers to how and why the turnaround at Excellence Elementary was successful, and in what ways the turnaround was not successful. Thus, I used their stories to tell the story of the turnaround, building upon their knowledge to create new knowledge that could benefit others who attempt a similar endeavor. In doing so, I capitalized on the social constructivist tenet that maintains that each person has a different interpretation and construction of the knowledge process. By speaking to a variety of stakeholders with different perspectives on the turnaround, I was able to obtain the clearest understanding of the successes and failures of the project.

Vygotsksy's (1978) work greatly contributed to the development of constructivism by suggesting that every function in a person's cultural development appears first *between* people. This emphasis on the priority of relationships in knowledge construction was key to the PLAS philosophy and critical to the way I approached my research in the field. Under a constructivist framework, the process of inquiry was influenced by the researcher *and* the context of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into three chapters. Chapter I provides an introduction to the background of the study; the purpose and significance of the study; the research

questions; an overview of the methods used; and the theoretical framework. Chapter II

discusses the historical overview and context through a review of prevailing literature.

Chapter III presents the findings and analysis of the study.

CHAPTER II: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

> . . . we are of the humble opinion that we have the right to enjoy the privileges
> of free men. But that we do not will appear in instances, and we beg leave to
> mention one out of many and that is of the education of our children which
> now receive no benefit from the free schools in the town of Boston, which we
> think is a great grievance, as by woeful experience we now feel the want of a
> common education. We, therefore, must fear for our rising offspring to see
> them in ignorance in a land of gospel light when there is provision made for
> them as well as others and yet can't enjoy them, and for no other reason can be
> given this than they are black . . . We therefore pray your Honors that you
> would in your wisdom some provision would be made for the free education of
> our dear children. And in duty bound shall ever pray.
>> (Petition to the State Legislature of The Commonwealth of
>> Massachusetts Bay 1787 as cited in Kluger, 1975, Part I Epigraph)

This literature review begins with theories of change for school reform and transformation and identifies national efforts in the United States toward school improvement. It follows with an examination of the plethora of reform initiatives specifically launched by LAUSD, and it explores the research behind the strategies utilized by PLAS. Finally, it reviews the historical data and conditions at Excellence Elementary School, a participant of PLAS and the subject of this study. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What reflections do community stakeholders have about the efficacy of the Five Key Strategies used by PLAS for the turnaround initiative at Excellence Elementary?

2. Do stakeholders at Excellence Elementary believe these were the right strategies? Were they the most effective strategies?

3. What are the stakeholders' perceptions of the implementation of the turnaround strategies at Excellence Elementary?

4. What can be learned from the turnaround process at Excellence Elementary that may inform other turnaround projects?

To respond to these questions and establish the credibility and context of the Partnership Model, it is imperative to first carefully examine the research at multiple levels of school reformation.

Theories of Change for School Reform and Transformation

Since 1787, citizens of America have demanded a quality education for their children. The above quote from the petition to the state legislature of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Bay is an excellent example of a dream deferred. Today, the call for quality education is being heard, as each year more and more well-intentioned reforms have promised to make schools better. From charters to small high schools, from high stakes testing to teacher performance pay, from turnaround schools to laptops for every student, the waves of school reform have continued and their promises have only kept growing. The momentum continues because Americans believe education is important, and what is important to the public is important to elected officials (David & Cuban, 2010).

Payne (2008) wrote that the failure of such a large percentage of urban school reforms is hardly surprising, but what is surprising is the inability of reformers and policymakers to learn from their mistakes, such as that "the essential problem in our schools isn't children learning; it is adult learning" (Payne, 2008, p. 179). Educational practitioners and researchers have generated significant bodies of knowledge, but communities of practice and the body politic have not *learned* from this knowledge; the

mistakes are repeated and "research on educational reform often rediscovers the wheel" (Muncey & McQuillan, 1996, p. 182). School communities, reformers, and policymakers alike have demonstrated an inability to access and implement relevant understandings "in part because the same dysfunctional social arrangements that do so much to cause failure also do a great deal to obscure its origins" (Payne, 2008, p. 5).

Change theory or change knowledge can be very powerful in informing education reform strategies and, in turn, getting results—but only in the hands (and minds and hearts) of people who have a deep knowledge of the dynamics of how the factors in question operate to get particular results. Ever since Argyris and Schon (1978) made the distinction between *espoused theories* and *theories in use*, we have been alerted to the problem of identifying what strategies are actually in use. Indeed, Fullan (2009) asserted:

> Having a "theory in use" is not good enough in and of itself. The people involved must also push to the next level, to make their theory of action explicit, as it relates to the specific assumptions and linkages that connect the strategy to the desired outcomes. (Fullan, 2009, p. 2).

The Partnership Model's theory of reform suggested the following:

- Solutions exist within our schools.
- Local capacity building and empowerment among all stakeholders is essential to school improvement.
- Customized instructional plans are necessary in order to meet the unique needs of individual schools.
- Rigorous internal and external accountability ensures progress.

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- Strategic and flexible spending will allow for site-based decision making.

- Executive Coaching with site leadership is critical to school success.

- Underperforming schools require a different delivery-service model in order to

   accelerate school performance. (Bass et al., 2009)

Tying these reform theories in with Argyris and Schon's (1978) concept of theories in

use, it is clear that it is important to analyze the quality of solutions developed by the

reforms.

Recent research has investigated the importance of underperforming schools and

the need to analyze the quality solutions researchers select when addressing the problems

that contribute to under achievement (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001). The

possibility that poor solutions may be implemented emphasizes the value of research-

based evidence in the improvement efforts that may need to improve at an organizational

level (Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson, & Daly, 2008). Organizational learning supports the

notion that in order for an organization to experience success, all members must take on

the responsibility of learning, sharing the learning, and engaging collectively in working

towards desired goals (Honig & Hatch, 2004; Mulford, Silinis, & Leithwood, 2004).

National Reform Efforts in America

For more than 60 years, America has been trying to turn around schools with

somewhat tragic results (Fullan, 2009). Policy makers, teachers, administrators, parents,

and others have struggled to find ways to turn around the low-performing public schools.

Spurred by the chronic disparity in the achievement gap between White students and

Black students, the nation's policy members have been compelled to seek understanding

and solutions. The Equality of Educational Opportunity Study (EEOS), also known as the "Coleman Study," was commissioned by the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1966 to assess the availability of equal educational opportunities to children of different races, colors, religions, and national origins (Coleman, 1966). The report was authorized as part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and was conceived within the context of the legal system's growing reliance on social science to inform legal decisions, most notably *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954. Thus it served as an example of the use of a social survey as an instrument of national policy-making. Written by James Coleman, the report concluded that the strongest influence on the individual achievement of both Black and White students was the educational proficiency of their peers. In the decades following the report's publication, there was a dramatic drop in school segregation in the Southern US and a significant decline in the proportion of Black students attending 90% to 100% minority schools in the nation as a whole. However, the gains in desegregation peaked in the 1980s and were practically reversed in the 1990s (Gamoran & Long, 2006).

The EEOS report consisted of test scores and questionnaire responses obtained from first-, third-, sixth-, ninth-, and twelfth-grade students, and questionnaire responses from teachers and principals. These data were obtained from a national sample of schools in the United States. Data on students included age; gender; race and ethnic identity; socioeconomic background; attitudes toward learning; education and career goals; and racial attitudes. Scores on teacher-administered standardized academic tests were also included. These scores reflected performance on tests assessing ability and

achievement in verbal skills, nonverbal associations, reading comprehension, and mathematics. Data on teachers and principals included academic discipline; assessment of verbal facility; salary; education and teaching experience; and attitudes toward race (Fullan, 2009).

Though the report called into question the impact of schools on student achievement, more recent work has highlighted the important role teachers play in raising student achievement. To the extent that teachers are the main resource schools provide to students, it may seem to be merely an academic matter whether schools rather than teachers influence student achievement. However, the fact that there is more variance in student achievement within schools than between them has important policy implications. (Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Sewell, Hauser, & Wolf, 1980). Specifically, this fact suggests that policies aimed at altering the sorting process of students among schools (i.e., school choice, desegregation) may be less effective than policies aimed at raising teacher quality or altering the distribution of teachers across classrooms. Given that econometric studies have found substantial cumulative effects of being assigned a high quality teacher over a number of years (Aaronson, Barrow, & Sander, 2007; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004), the match of high quality teachers with disadvantaged students has important implications for equality of educational opportunity and closing test score gaps (Tyson, 2008).

The Effective Schools Movement

Lezette (2009) reported that the Coleman Study concluded that family background, not the school, was the major determinant of student achievement. Coleman

was foremost among a group of social scientists who believed during the 1960s and 70s that family factors, such as poverty or a parent's lack of education, prevented children from learning regardless of the method of instruction. His report, along with the related literature, was the catalyst to the creation of *compensatory education* programs that dominated school improvement throughout those decades. According to Edmonds (1982), these programs, provided chiefly through Title I of the Elementary Secondary Education Act, "taught low-income children to learn in ways that conformed to most schools' preferred ways of teaching" (as cited in Lezotte, 2009, p. 3). These programs focused on changing students' behavior in order to compensate for their disadvantaged backgrounds, and they made no effort to change school behavior. By lending official credence to the notion that schools do not make a difference in predicting student achievement, the report stimulated a vigorous reaction, instigating many of the studies that would later come to define the research base for the Effective Schools Movement.

The educational researchers who conducted these studies developed a body of research that supported the premise that all children can learn and that the school controls the factors necessary to assure student mastery of the core curriculum. Of course, the Effective Schools Movement did not discount the important impact of family on student learning. Edmonds (1982) stated, "while schools may be primarily responsible for whether or not students function adequately in school, the family is probably critical in determining whether or not students flourish in school" (as cited in Lezotte, 2009, p.3). Thus, the first task of the Effective Schools researchers was to identify existing effective schools—schools that were successful in educating all students regardless of their

socioeconomic status or family background. Examples of these especially effective

schools were found repeatedly, in varying locations and in both large and small

communities. After recognizing these schools, the researchers remained to identify the

common characteristics found among them. Specifically, they looked for the

philosophies, policies, and practices that the schools had in common. Upon closer

inspection, the researchers found that all of these especially effective schools had strong

instructional leadership and a strong sense of mission; they demonstrated effective

instructional behaviors; they held high expectations for all students; they practiced

frequent monitoring of student achievement; and they operated in a safe and orderly

manner (Edmonds, 1982).

These attributes eventually became known as the Correlates of Effective Schools.

Edmonds (1982) first formally identified the Correlates of Effective Schools as the

following:

- The leadership of the principals was notable for substantial attention to the quality
  of instruction.

- A pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus existed at the schools.

- An orderly, safe climate conducive to teaching and learning existed at the schools.

- Teacher behaviors conveyed the expectation that all students were expected to
  obtain at least minimum mastery.

- The schools used measures of pupil achievement as the basis for program
  evaluation.

Eventually, Edmonds (1982) identified seven essential elements as significant to success of turning around underperforming schools, including:

- *A clear and focused school mission*: Each school had a clearly articulated mission which the staff shared an understanding of and a commitment to the instructional goals, priorities, assessment procedures, and accountability

- *A safe and orderly environment*: Each school had an orderly, purposeful atmosphere that was free from the threat of physical harm for both students and staff. However, the atmosphere was not oppressive and was conducive to teaching and learning.

- *High expectations*: Each school displayed a climate of expectation in which the staff believed and demonstrated that students could attain mastery of basic skills and that they (the staff) had the capability to help students achieve such mastery.

- *Opportunity to learn and time on task*: Teachers allocated a significant amount of classroom time to instruction in basic skills areas. For a high percentage of that allocated time, students were engaged in planned learning activities directly related to identified objectives.

- *Instructional leadership*: The principal acted as the instructional leader who effectively communicated the mission of the school to the staff, parents, and students, and who understood and applied the characteristics of instructional effectiveness in the management of the instructional program at the school.

- *Frequent monitoring of student progress*: Feedback on student academic progress was frequently obtained. Multiple assessment methods such as teacher-made

tests, samples of student work, mastery skills checklists, criterion-referenced tests, and norm-referenced tests were used. The results of testing were used to improve individual student performance and also to improve the instructional program.

- *Positive home-school relations*: Parents understood and supported the school's basic mission and were given the opportunity to play an important role in helping the school achieve its mission.

In conclusion, Edmonds (1982) identified concrete systems and structures that he believed to be essential in establishing successful schools, particularly in addressing the chronic academic performance gap of Black students. The effective schools model was utilized across the nation as a viable reform model.

A Nation at Risk

On August 26, 1981, President Reagan established the National Commission on Excellence in Education and directed it to present a report on the quality of education in America. In 1983, the report entitled *Nation at Risk: the Imperative for Educational Reform* concluded that America grappled with pinpointing the key strategies of improving the achievement of all of its children. Reagan noted the central importance of education in American life when he said, "Certainly there are few areas of American life as important to our society, our people, and to our families as our schools and colleges" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 9).   The report stated:

> Part of what is at risk is the promise first made on this continent: All, regardless
> of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for
> developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise

means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can

hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful

employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own

interests but also the progress of society itself. (National Commission on

Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 11)

The Commission found that the way to address achievement was to define

excellence and this launched the pathway to academic standards across the nation. *A*

Nation at Risk triggered a national dialogue all across America and thus propelled

investigative research, programs, and initiatives on school reform that while well

intended, have failed to establish sustainable, replicable change in the nation's most

academically struggling schools. Significant research has chronicled these efforts in and

around public schooling and has identified the strengths and the weakness of these efforts

over time (Elmore, 2000; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Ravitch, 1983; Sizer, 1992; Smith

& O'Day, 1990; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

No Child Left Behind

These courageous and tenacious efforts have now been intensified in the 21st

century by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 and its focus on reform based

on evidence and accountability. On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed

into law the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002), which reauthorized the

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in dramatic ways. This landmark

event certainly punctuated the power of assessment in the lives of students, teachers,

parents, and others with deep investments in the American educational system. NCLB

brought considerable clarity to the value, use, and importance of achievement testing of students in kindergarten through high school.

With NCLB, a new era began where accountability, local control, parental involvement, and funding what works became the cornerstones of the nation's education system. If children were not learning, the law required that we find out why. If schools were not performing, options and help would be made available. According to Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education, the stated focus of NCLB was to "see every child in America—regardless of ethnicity, income, or background—achieve high standards" (NCLB, 2002).

In a fundamental way, NCLB was the next obvious step for a nation already committed to excellence and fairness in education. The legacy of reform preceding NCLB culminated in an opportunity for the country to put real muscle behind what had already been put into place. Funding was now tied directly to accountability expectations and schools were compelled ensure that all students learn the essential skills and knowledge defined by the state using grade-level standards and benchmarks. "All" meant all and data reporting under NCLB was required to describe the learning. On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind journey of each student and the effectiveness of every school in that effort (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003).

The NCLB Act reauthorized ESEA in dramatic ways. NCLB brought considerable clarity to the value, use, and importance of achievement testing of students in kindergarten through high school. Under NCLB, states were required to develop a

statewide accountability system that ensured each local agency made adequate yearly

progress (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2006). The NCLB established

accountability requirements for all schools and school districts (NCLB, 2002). States

were required to assess third- through eighth-grade students annually in reading and

mathematics. These tests needed to be based on state standards that were challenging.

The results were made public so anyone could track the performance of any school in the

nation. Improvement among disadvantaged children would be demonstrated under the

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) provisions of NCLB. Schools unable to demonstrate

AYP would be provided with assistance and were subject to possible corrective action.

Additionally, all states were required to submit plans that described their achievement

standards, aligned assessments, reporting procedures, and accountability systems (NCLB,

2002).

In exchange for greater accountability, the NCLB regulations provided states with

far-reaching flexibility and control over how they used federal funds. Schools were

encouraged to use funds for teacher retention, professional development, and technology

training that best suited their needs without having to obtain separate federal approval.

States were also given greater flexibility and control over their programs for English

language learners (NCLB, 2002). NCLB regulations provided options, such as

transferring to another school and tutoring, for parents of children in under-performing or

unsafe schools. NCLB supported and encouraged schools to identify and use

instructional programs that worked. Scientifically based instructional programs were

supported and funds made available so teachers could gain and strengthen skills in

effective instructional techniques (NCLB, 2002). Schools and districts responded to the accountability demand through increasing teacher quality, reforms, and disaggregated data analysis (Mintrop, 2004; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2007). However, despite the efforts of NCLB, instead of making strides in the endeavor to close the achievement gap, more schools have surfaced as failing schools (CDE, 2009c). The law did not provide any direction or answers as to how schools were to achieve their goals. Although research has identified examples of effective schools, many more schools exist that are unsuccessful.

Twenty-First Century School Reform

Twenty-first century school reform efforts have continued to be the top priority of nearly everyone in the nation. Each year, more and more well-intentioned reforms have promised to make schools better. Large urban schools districts have contributed to the research-based practices that have served as the inspiration for the operating practices of other school districts across the nation. Case in point: New York City's mayor, elected by the voters to take control of a failing school system, chose a Panel of Educational Inquiry and a new chancellor (David & Cuban, 2010). Both researchers and practitioners have painted similar pictures of the ebb and flow of reforms, specifically what it takes to make them work and why so many fail (David & Cuban, 2010). The emergence of large urban district reform initiatives have included New York City Public Schools, San Diego City Schools, Boston Public Schools, and Miami-Dade Public Schools. In New York, Chancellor Rudy Crew identified a specified number of schools that were underperforming, entitled Empowerment Schools, that were allowed levels of autonomy

and innovation over the curriculum, budget decisions, and flexibility from district mandates (New York City Department of Education, 2006). In addition, Chicago Public School District (CPS) launched an initiative in 2004 called Renaissance 2010. CPS's theory of change was to move away from the traditional methods for school improvement to focus on a portfolio of school structures that allowed for local decision making authority, charter schools, contract schools and performance school.

Finally, in Denver Public Schools in 2007, school redesign spawned much excitement across the nation because of attempts to allow for individual school autonomy. The goal was to simply allow school communities to have the freedom to figure things out on their own. However, they soon discovered that autonomy without clearly defined expectations and accountability created a cluster of schools where the results were mixed and where the codification of best practices was unclear (Eck & Goodwin, 2008).

Another form of national school reform interest and input was being established by the private sector. The Gates Foundation began to establish their researched-based theory of change by investing heavily in the notion that smaller high schools would provide greater opportunities for high school students to access a quality education and would significantly increase the graduation rate (Darling-Hammond, 2002). Beginning in 2000, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation had a big idea about how to fix the problems of American education, which included breaking up large high schools and turning them into small schools and small learning communities of 400 or fewer students. The foundation believed that its new small high schools would lift graduation rates and

student achievement, especially among minority students, because of the close

relationships between students and teachers (Ravitch, 1983). Thus, the nation's large

urban school districts, whose comprehensive high schools typically ranged between 1,800

and 4,000 students, set forth on the journey of reconfiguring their schools into small,

personalized learning communities that would allow fewer students to fall through the

cracks (Darling-Hammond, 2002).

Charter School Reform Moves Across the Nation

The *charter school* idea in the United States was originated by Ray Budde, a

professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and it was embraced by Albert

Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, in 1988 when he called for

the reform of the public schools by establishing charter schools or *schools of choice*. At

the time, a few schools already existed that were not called charter schools but that

embodied some of their principles. As originally conceived, the ideal model of a charter

school was as a legally and financially autonomous public school (without tuition,

religious affiliation, or selective student admissions) that would operate much like a

private business—free from many state laws and district regulations and accountable

more for student outcomes rather than for processes or inputs (RPP International & the

University of Montana, 1997).

Charter schools are now private or secondary schools that receive public money,

and like other schools may also receive private donations, but are not subject to some of

the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to other public schools. This arrangement is

in exchange for some type of accountability and autonomy for producing certain results,

which are set forth in each school's charter. Charter schools are open and attended by choice. While charter schools provide an alternative to other public schools, they are part of the public education system and are not allowed to charge tuition. Where enrollment in a charter school is oversubscribed, admission is frequently allocated by lottery-based admissions (RPP International & the University of Montana, 1997).

Three Models of the Reform Effort

School reform began to emerge across the United States, primarily in large urban communities where schools had a reputation of chronic academic failure. Ravitch (1983) stated that there was a great wave of enthusiasm for parental choice in public education. Innovative schools that began to veer away from traditional public schools ranged from vouchers to private schools and charter schools to non-profit organizations, all of which obtained the status of state-authorized agencies. The following sections provide three model examples of these reform efforts.

Mastery Charter Academy of Philadelphia.

The city of Philadelphia, desperate to address the failing schools in the district, made a bold statement by establishing Mastery Charter School in September 2001, whose motto was "Excellence, No Excuses." It was founded by a coalition of business and civic leaders, and the original school opened with 100 ninth-grade students in rented office space in North Philadelphia. It later became a nonprofit charter school network that still operates seven schools in Philadelphia serving 4,200 students in grades K-12. In three cases, the original middle schools were expanded to high school grades and six of the schools were turnarounds of low-performing district schools. Mastery Charter integrated

modern management and effective educational practices to drive student achievement. It created an achievement-focused school culture by sweating the small stuff, while fostering meaningful, personalized relationships between students and adults. In short, Mastery insisted on high expectations and high support so all students could achieve success (Mastery Charter Schools, 2011).

Harlem Children's Zone model.

Another reform effort emerged in New York City as the academic failure of the public schools in Harlem began to disintegrate an entire community; a new and holistic vision for serving a community sprang into action. At the time of the reforms, New York Public Schools served more than one million students and had a tremendous need for a portfolio of school options in the midst of the educational crisis. The numbers were startling: 760,000 children in New York City lived in poverty; barely a third (39.3%) of the city's elementary- and middle-school students met or exceeded grade level on state math exams; only 35.3% met or exceeded grade level on city math exams; 20% of the city's high school students dropped out before graduation; and roughly 215,000 children between the ages of 6 and 13 were unsupervised by a family member in the after-school hours when children and youth are most likely to use alcohol, tobacco, or drugs or commit a violent crime (Nauffts, 2002).

The Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) initiative officially launched in 1997 and established clear-cut geographical boundaries for the provision of services offered through the initiative (Nauffts, 2002). HCZ created a new paradigm for fighting poverty that was intended to overcome the limits of traditional approaches. The model focused

primarily and intensively on the social, health, and educational development of children

by providing wrap-around programs that improved the children's family and

neighborhood environments. The theory of change underlying the HCZ model required

the coordinated application of its five core principles listed below (Harlem Children's

Zone, 2010). These principles included:

- *A neighborhood-based approach*: It is vitally important to establish a pervasive

  presence in the individual community where you work. In its mission to bring

  about widespread change, HCZ found it necessary to work on a scale large

  enough to create a tipping point in a community's cultural norms, a threshold

  beyond which a shift can occur away from destructive patterns and towards

  constructive goals.

- *The HCZ pipeline*: The HCZ Pipeline, a continuum of services, provided children

  and families with a seamless series of free, coordinated, best-practice programs.

  They focused on the needs of children at every developmental age, including

  specific programs addressing pre-natal care, infants, toddlers, elementary school,

  middle school, adolescence, and college. Academic excellence was a principal

  goal of the HCZ Pipeline, but high-quality schools were only one of the means

  used to achieve it. Others included nurturing stable families, supporting youth

  development, improving health through fitness and nutrition, and cultivating

  engaged and involved adults and community stakeholders (Harlem Children's

  Zone, 2010). Figure 4 illustrates this continuum.

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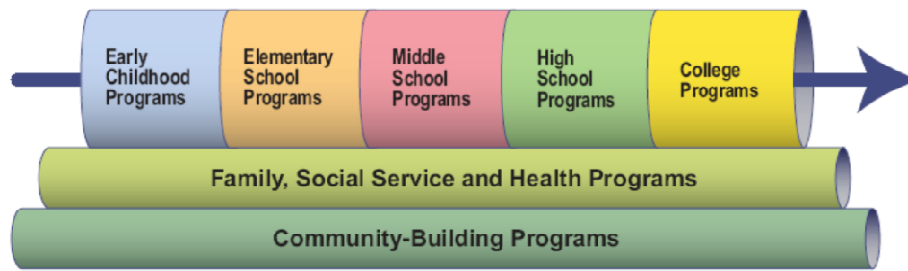
Figure 4. The HCZ pipeline. (Harlem Children's Zone, 2010)

Important aspects of the HCZ pipeline included:

- *Building community*: From the beginning, HCZ worked collaboratively with local residents, faith-based institutions, cultural organizations, and other leaders on an array of issues affecting children. Children's development is profoundly affected by their environment and the most important part of that environment is, of course, the family and the home.

- *Evaluation*: Evaluation was a key element of strategies at HCZ, driving program improvements, helping to identify needed enhancements, and providing managers with real-time decision-making data. Evaluation can be seen as a function externally imposed on community-based organizations, something forced on them by funders or policy-makers. However, evaluation is key to ensuring that successes continue.

- *Culture of success*: HCZ was an organizational culture that emphasized accountability, leadership, teamwork, and a deep, shared passion to improve the lives of poor children. High standards pave the way to establish role models to

young people. This combination of shared values and high standards leads to great morale and staff pride. (Harlem Children's Zone, 2010)

In his more than 20 years with HCZ, Geoffrey Canada became nationally recognized for his pioneering work in helping children and families in Harlem and as a passionate advocate for education reform (Nauffts, 2002).

School reform efforts in California.

While the efforts to urgently improve schools in the large urban communities across the nation continued to incubate, California's dropout rates were high; the number of English language learners, Latino students, and African American students who were not graduating and going on to college was staggeringly high. Reform efforts to improve the achievement of underperforming students throughout the state of California became the priority of foundations and research institutes (CSRQ Center, American Institutes for Research, 2006).

Ken Futernick, Director of California's WestEd's Tipping Point School Turnaround Center, developed a unique school turnaround strategy that was based on a theory of change developed by Gladwell (2000, 2002). In *Excellence Loves Company*, Futernick (2007) argued that chronically failing schools could be turned around only if they would undergo bold, systemic change to reverse deeply imbedded patterns of dysfunction. He observed that failing schools tended to regress unless they reached a tipping point, which explained why providing some help has amounted to offering no help for many schools. The tipping point turnaround theory suggested that whatever is

done for failing schools must be sufficient for them to reach a threshold that can sustain success. Key components of a comprehensive tipping point turnaround strategy included:

- A collaborative and trusting team environment.

- Time for planning, collaboration, and professional development.

- Strong instructional and operational leadership.

- Local decision-making authority.

- Relevant, engaging, standards-based instruction.

- Community and family involvement.

- High-quality instruction through intensive support and evaluation.

- A physical environment that is clean, safe, and conducive to learning.

- External, sustained, on-site local support to manage the turnaround.

- Reciprocal accountability.

- Attracting and retaining high-quality educators. (CSRQ Center, American Institutes for Research, 2006)

Futernick concluded that the vast number of high-poverty schools that have continued to fail decade after decade indicated that the remedies used are capable of producing only limited results in most cases. No strategy that teachers, administrators, and educational reformers have tried suggested awareness of how to produce dramatic and lasting change in the vast majority of these schools. However, what had not been tried was a holistic approach that created a context, all at once, for teachers and their students to succeed. If it really were possible to trigger social epidemics among teachers, and if reformers were willing to create highly supportive and professional environments,

then maybe it would be possible to accomplish what many Californians still believe is possible: a systematic (and systemic) turnaround of low-performing schools into the thriving, high-performing learning environments they should be (Futernick, 2007).

School reform in Los Angeles.

In 2000, LAUSD had the responsibility of educating more than one million students. The district commitment to school improvement was always a number one priority, yet like many large urban school districts, LAUSD struggled to accomplish the goal of academic excellence for all students. Indeed, Kerchner, Menefee-Libey, Mulfinger, and Clayton (2008) reported that the academic history of LAUSD revealed a *rise to fall effect*, in which it shifted from an internationally renowned school district at the turn of the 20th century to a failing school system as it struggled through the first 10 years of the 21st century. They chronicled the state of education over nearly 100 hundred years in the following timeline:

- *1919*: LAUSD was recognized throughout the United States and visitors came from other countries to study it.

- *1937*: Children attained higher ability than at any former time.

- *1958*: High school students scored in the top 27% nationally.

- *1966*: The State Assembly released district-to-district test score results. LAUSD was in the bottom half.

- *1967*: LA students are among the poorest readers in the United States. (Kerchner et al., 2008)

Thus, throughout the next three decades LAUSD launched an assault to turn

student achievement around at the second largest school district in the nation. The whole

institution of public education was changing, and Los Angeles became a case study of the

dismemberment of old institutional assumptions in the face of adopting new ones

(Kerchner et al., 2008). The big dreams, ambitious efforts, and lofty ideas shocked the

system, yet they failed to lift achievement from the bottom bands. One such reform

initiative in LAUSD was a district initiative called Los Angeles Education Alliance for

School Reform Now (LEARN), created in the mid-1980s. It professed a new process that

would free local schools to make changes to improve themselves, and it created

neighborhood schools that shifted away from centralized command and control to

become an output driven system (Curtiss, 1993). It also fostered decentralization, high

standards, grassroots involvement, and school choice.

LEARN marshaled the Los Angeles community to develop an educational reform

plan. Led by a working group of 13 community leaders who were concerned about the

plight of public education in Los Angeles, LEARN was created to be a goal- and action-

oriented organization that would involve the broader community in reaching consensus

on a plan for systemic reform of the LAUSD. Because it was committed to community-

wide involvement, the group hired Mike Roos as its president, who was then Speaker *pro*

tempore of the California State Assembly and a 14-year veteran of the Los Angeles

political and public-policy arena. Roos resigned from the Assembly and joined LEARN

in March 1991 and LEARN officially opened in June 1991. An important initial task was

to create a policy-making body called the Council of Trustees, which was a group of

community leaders representing the diverse body of stakeholders in the Los Angeles education reform process, including teachers, administrators, parents, and representatives from colleges and universities, business, ethnic, religious, social service, labor, and other community-based organizations. Trustees were charged with representing their constituencies on the council; communicating the council's goals, purpose, and progress to their constituents; providing input and information; working to achieve consensus on the plan; communicating the plan to the broader community; and engendering community support. Careful attention was paid to representation and input from stakeholders. LEARN also worked closely with the LAUSD, employee bargaining units, and other organizations devoted to the interests of children and education in Los Angeles. These educators, community leaders, and advocates provided much of the impetus and vision for the plan (Dobbs, 1993).

Working toward a common goal of improved education for every child, LEARN's 625 trustees reached consensus on a community agenda for restructuring education in Los Angeles. Roy Romer, former Governor of Colorado, became Superintendent in 2002 and launched his strategy for scaled school improvement by introducing the elementary schools to a managed instruction model utilizing *Open Court*. In 2007, Superintendent Brewer identified the 50 lowest performing schools in Los Angeles and launched the District's High Priority Schools, which were schools tightly managed with specific curriculum, timelines, and oversight regarding before and after school activities for students. The schools were left with the threat and fear of reconstitution if they failed to make aggressive progress (Bass, 2008).

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In addition, by 2008, there were more than 100 charter schools operating within the district (Kerchner et al., 2008), and substantial numbers of these were run by Charter Management Organizations (CMOs), like Green Dot Public Schools, the Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools, Partnership to Uplift Communities (PUC), and Inner City Education Foundation (ICEF). With the support of major funders such as the Gates and Broad Foundations, these CMOs were clear in their desire to reshape the public education landscape based on a shared belief that the district was unable or unwilling to make the radical changes in both policy and practice to meet the needs of the communities that they served (Rubin & Furedi, 2006, 2007, 2009).

School Takeovers in Perspective

Across the nation, takeovers of schools or entire district systems by mayors or state legislatures have come about as a result of increasing pressure to improve low-performing schools, particularly those in central cities serving disadvantaged or minority students (Green & Carl, 2000). Takeovers of urban school systems have shared at least one characteristic: a perceived need to install new leadership into educationally and financially troubled districts. The rationale for taking over school systems has been based on two circumstances, including (a) poor performance in accordance with both academic indicators (standardized test scores, graduation rates, dropout rates) and leadership and management issues (including financial mismanagement and bureaucratic dysfunction), and (b) the perceived inability and/or unwillingness of the existing school governance system to respond to the existing situation (Green & Carl, 2000). Growing discrepancies in academic achievement and increased pressures placed on urban

governance have led the public and policymakers to demand a major overhaul in many cities. In the past, mayors avoided the political tangle of education, but this attitude had become impossible in a climate that focused on the role of education in a city's overall well-being (Kirst, 2002).

Los Angeles Mayor Seeks Takeover: "Dream with Me"

Antonio Villaraigosa swept into the Los Angeles mayor's office in 2005 as the city's 41st mayor, and he was the first Latino elected into the position. His victory was due in large part to a promise to reform Los Angeles' monumentally failing public education system. It mattered little to voters that the mayor of Los Angeles had no endowed authority over the schools, for they believed he could effect change. Mayor Villaraigosa laid out his reform strategy in a State of the City address that insisted on a clear vision for how the school district would operate under the supervision of City Hall. In his address, Mayor Villaraigosa described LAUSD as being in a state of crisis, with failing schools and high dropout rates. Citing a need for improvement in the city's schools, Villaraigosa immediately set in motion an unprecedented reform revolution within LAUSD, in which he called in favors and tapped allies from his many years in state and local politics. He even very nearly passed a state law giving him actual control of the schools (Boghossian, 2006b).

On April 18, 2006, at the State of the City address, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa (2006a) stated:

> Our public schools are struggling just to survive . . . we can't be a great global
> city if we lose half of our workforce before they graduate from high school. We'll

never realize the promise of our people . . . we won't tap our talent . . . LA won't be one city . . . if we shrug our shoulders and adopt the path of least resistance . . . If we choose to remain a city . . . where 81 percent of middle school students are trapped in failing schools . . . we need to accelerate our ambitions. Now, I know some of these ideas are new, and some are not. And over the years, we've had many well-intentioned efforts at reforming the educational system. But any student of the LA Unified can tell you . . . that we can't address our problems in the classroom. We won't make real headway unless we change the lack of accountability at the top. I believe we need new leadership at every level.

Soon after, Villaraigosa sponsored California Assembly Bill 1381 (2006), which would give him direct control over the schools. Villaraigosa hoped to achieve total takeover of the district, plagued for years by a variety of performance problems. AB 1381 sought to revise the governance and operation of LAUSD in three major areas, including broadening the LAUSD superintendent's authority, limiting the authority and responsibilities of the LAUSD school board, and establishing a Council of Mayors with specified roles and responsibilities. It also sought to establish the Los Angeles Mayor's Community Partnership for School Excellence to administer, under the direction of the mayor, a demonstration project that would improve student performance among low-performing schools (Fund for Public Schools, 2006). AB 1381 was designed to achieve the following main goals:

- Significant improvements in student learning and academic achievement based on the academic standards of the State of California, graduation requirements, and other standards for assessing the achievement of students.

- Significantly improved graduation rates and significantly reduced dropout rates.

- Significant reduction in the academic achievement gap among racial and ethnic groups, between students with exceptional needs and students without those needs, and between inadequate and adequate proficiency with the English language.

- Parent satisfaction with the schools that their children attend. (Fund for Public Schools, 2006).

Additionally, AB 1381 aimed to establish a Council of Mayors representing the 27 municipalities served by LAUSD, including leaders from the 26 smaller cities served by LAUSD and members of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors who would represent unincorporated areas (Blume & Rubin, 2006).

On October 10, 2006, LAUSD officials together with the League of Women Voters, the California School Boards Association, the school district's two PTA groups, and others filed court papers arguing that AB 1381 should be overturned because the California state constitution forbade city officials from being in charge of schools. In its lawsuit, the district claimed that AB 1381 violated constitutional mandates separating the operations of cities and the education system. The suit also said the law violated the Los Angeles City Charter, which did not grant the mayor specific authority over public schools, and that it disenfranchised voters who did not live in Los Angeles but were

served by the district and those who voted for LAUSD board members. On December 21, 2006, a Los Angeles Superior Court judge sided entirely with the district's arguments on the legality of the bill, declared AB 1381 unconstitutional, and blocked its implementation (Boghossian, 2006a).

As the district neared the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the demand for change in schools was thrust upon the city of Los Angeles and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's bid to take mayoral control went down to defeat unlike cities like Boston, New York, Chicago, and New Jersey. Though the Assembly Bill 1381 was approved by the state senate lawmakers, ultimately the 9th Circuit Court overruled the mayoral takeover move as unconstitutional, leaving a gaping hole in the future of public education in Los Angeles (Blume & Rubin, 2006). The mayor was in relentless pursuit for change and improvement in Los Angeles' schools, and the Partnership Model, core values, and key strategies for school reform were guided by this goal.

Community Partnership for School Excellence

In his quest to move forward on the education platform on which he ran in 2005, Mayor Villaraigosa became relentless in his pursuit for creating schools of excellence for all of Los Angeles' students. Commissioning a consulting firm to design a research-based model that would serve as the centerpiece of his vision, Mayor Villaraigosa established the Los Angeles Mayor's Community Partnership for School Excellence. By September 2006, he took direct operational control over three low-performing high schools and their feeder elementary and middle schools in different parts of Los Angeles. He also worked in partnership with LAUSD, parent and community leaders and

organizations, and school personnel and employee organizations to improve student performance at these schools. Initially, the efforts involved more than three-dozen schools and served as many as 80,000 students, which was equivalent to the state's fourth-largest school district.

The Schoolhouse: A Framework to Give Every Child in LAUSD an Excellent Education

While awaiting the outcome of the state legislature and ultimately the Courts' responses to the challenge of AB 1381 constitutionality, the mayor forged forward to further develop a vision for the students in LAUSD. He led the City of Los Angeles' increased awareness about the condition of its public schools and set out a vision for how all schools within LAUSD could be dramatically improved. This vision, called the Schoolhouse, called for a school district where:

- All parents had the option to send their children to small, safe schools.
- Schools were empowered with control over key decisions and effectively supported.
- All students received a rigorous, enriching curriculum.
- Parents were included in schools.
- Community assets and resources were connected to schools.
- The district was decentralized into "families of schools" and the vast majority of public funds went to school sites rather than to the bureaucracy.
- All members of the school community were held accountable for student achievement. (Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, 2008a)

These points were developed into six pillars that were research-based and proven to be

essential to improving underperforming schools. These pillars were:

- *Pillar 1*: High Expectations Initiatives.

- *Pillar 2*: Safe, Small, and Clean Initiatives.

- *Pillar 3*: Empowered Leadership Initiatives.

- *Pillar 4*: Powerful Teaching and Rigorous Curriculum Initiatives.

- *Pillar 5*: Family and Community Involvement.

- *Pillar 6*: More Money to Schools (Villaraigosa, 2006b).

At the exact same time in 2006, L.A. Unified Superintendent Roy Romer and

district board President Marlene Canter appeared at the legislative hearing to make their

case against AB 1381. No Republicans were expected to vote for the bill, so to pass, it

needed 21 of the 25 Democrats in the Senate and 41 of 48 Democrats in the Assembly

(Villaraigosa, 2006b). The bill was passed and eventually challenged by LAUSD

attorneys. Finally, in April of 2007, in a 3-0 ruling by the Second District Court of

Appeals in Los Angeles the law was declared unconstitutional. "The citizens of Los

Angeles have the constitutional right to decide whether their school board is appointed or

elected," Justice Walter Croskey said in a ruling that upheld a judge's decision in

December 2006, striking down the law (Egelko, 2007).

When the constitutionality of AB 1381 was struck down, Villaraigosa shifted

tactics. Most significantly, he created a partnership with newly elected Superintendent

David Brewer, establishing an agreement to move to dramatically bring change to

LAUSD. They publicly agreed to infuse a new division into the district that would allow

for innovation of new practices for the schools. All of the focus on improving LAUSD's

schools laid the foundation for a new movement for change in LAUSD. The mayor

joined in PLAS to oversee a small number of the district's lowest performing schools,

and, while charter schools continued to open, the district introduced a new division to the

system entitled "Innovation Design," prompting creative solutions to school

improvement. By 2009, "School Choice" was born, giving all stakeholders the

opportunity submit applications to lead locally identified poor-performing schools.

Teachers groups, United Teachers Los Angeles, charters, and any viable outside

organization could petition to lead and operate these schools under the Choice guidelines

(Bass et al., 2009).

The Mayor's articulation of this educational vision for the city led to an

opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement throughout Los Angeles. This

opportunity included:

- Strong alignment between the mayor, school board, superintendent, UTLA and
  others who all had a common vision for change throughout LAUSD and the
  political will to implement a transformation plan.
- A new model through LAUSD's iDesign Division that helped to create a new
  structure for a "thin" local district that would drive dramatic improvements in
  student achievement in collaboration with the City's highest caliber civic
  organizations.
- A robust charter movement in Los Angeles that eventually developed strong
  models for reform.

- Vocal demand from parents, teachers, students, and community members to improve their schools.

- The development of capacity and talent in the region from the nonprofit and civic sector, such as the Partnership, Urban League, USC, Loyola Marymount University, and others. (Villaraigosa, 2006b).

A cornerstone in this work was the creation of PLAS, a unique collaboration between the City of Los Angeles and LAUSD announced by the mayor and Superintendent Brewer in August 2007. These two leaders committed to shift responsibility of some schools to the Mayor, allowing him to oversee 10 of the lowest performing schools in Los Angeles. This agreement was ratified in concert with an agreement with UTLA stating that the identified schools needed to acquire a 51% vote from each school (Education Resource Strategies, 2006; Los Angeles Unified School District & Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, 2008). PLAS sprouted from this movement for change and was uniquely positioned to help drive the district's transformation by serving as a catalyst to transform LAUSD public schools and help all children receive a quality education.

LAUSD's Innovation Division

Innovation became the mantra in the City as parents and community members were demanding change and improvement in the public schools of Los Angeles. The iDesign Division, also known as Innovation Design, established strategies to work differently and to identify multiple ways of improving schools. The following principles were used to encourage innovation with the network partners and school sites:

- Offer increased decision making at school level in exchange for clear and transparent accountabilities.

- Encourage strong linkages between educators, the community, families, and schools.

- Dedicate district staff to find a new way to run district services by innovating with iDivision schools.

- Share best practices from the Network Partners and schools with other district schools. (Rubin & Blume, 2007)

The iDesign Division consisted of a minimal core staff, which focused on compliance, back-office service improvement, data gathering, and external communications. In the academic year 2006-2007, at least two other network partners were working with the iDesign: Loyola Marymount University, working with Westchester High School, Wright Middle School, Kentwood Elementary School, and Cowan Elementary School and the Urban League/Bradley Foundation/University of Southern California, working with Crenshaw High School (Mobley, 2008).

Partnership Schools and the LAUSD Context

With over 700,000 students spanning 26 municipalities, LAUSD was the second largest school district in the country at the time of this study. Although the district contained over 150 of the highest performing state schools and made progress in some areas, on average, the district suffered from low graduation rates, deteriorating enrollment, low rates of proficiency on the CSTs, high financial pressures, and extremely low morale and public confidence.

Schools working with the Mayor's Partnership for Los Angeles Schools were facing even greater challenges. Beginning on July1, 2007, PLAS directly managed schools located within three families of schools concentrated in three communities. These were among the lowest performing schools in LAUSD and the state of California, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Schools Working with PLAS as of 2007

School Family	Communities Served	Schools	Population	% Free or Reduced Lunch	2007-2008 API	2006-2007 Rank
Roosevelt Family	East Los Angeles, Boyle Heights	B/High School	4,708	78.9%	557	1
		C/Middle School	2,436	90.5%	589	1
		D/Middle School	2,473	90.3%	593	1
		E/Elementary School	471	93.3%	677	1
Santee Family	South LA	F/Education Complex	3,468	78.5%	486	1
		G/Middle School	1,716	83.2%	541	1
South LA Family	Watts, South LA	H/Middle School	1,576	83.7%	519	1
		I/Elementary School	546	96.2%	655	1
		Excellence Elementary School	489	94.6%	646	1
		A/Elementary School	387	93.7%	607	1

Note. From California Department of Education (2009a, 2010a).

Memorandum of Understanding with LAUSD

LAUSD signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with PLAS for five years to serve and support PLAS schools. LAUSD's Board of Education maintained ultimate authority and oversight over all of the schools served by PLAS while delegating the vast majority of its service, support, and managerial functions for the schools to PLAS. Schools within Partnership Families of Schools reported to PLAS rather than to the LAUSD local district administrators. PLAS hired a Family of Schools leader who had responsibility for the day-to-day support for the Partnership schools and principals. LAUSD continued to provide some services to the PLAS schools, particularly in areas related to back-office operations like IT support and facilities maintenance (LAUSD, 2008). Overall, 90.3% of Partnership school students were Latino, 8.5% were African-American, and approximately 1% was categorized as "other." An additional 38.8% of students were categorized as English Language Learners (Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, 2008a).

Partnership Schools: Creating the Conditions for Change

PLAS believed that there were many blockades schools faced that limited their abilities to improve performance, thus PLAS was committed to changing these conditions to allow school communities the freedom to innovate and customize approaches to best meet their schools' needs. The MOU with LAUSD served as the primary mechanism to create the right conditions to accelerate student performance by providing the maximum freedom and autonomy permissible by law and by establishing applicable collective bargaining agreements to Partnership schools. In this way, PLAS allowed the school

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community the ability to make more decisions at the school site, rather than at the central LAUSD office (Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, 2008a).

PLAS' educational approach was grounded in the six pillars of the Schoolhouse Framework. All Partnership schools had strong alignment with the Pillars of the Schoolhouse, but they selected from and customized the different initiatives to meet their unique needs. Thus, the Schoolhouse was seen more as a framework in that not all initiatives within it were implemented by each Partnership school. Schools and their surrounding communities were recognized for having unique needs and needed to operate in ways that reflected their distinct characteristics. The framework for Partnership schools was developed to enable schools to maintain and further develop their own customized school plans while also providing a consistent foundation and coherent system of supports (Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, 2008a).

Excellence Elementary School: The Cinderella Story

The mission of Excellence Elementary School was dedicated to supporting children to achieve their full academic, social, and emotional potential by motivating them to become successful citizens in our diverse and ever changing society. Over the past 20 years, the demographics of the school community dramatically shifted from 57% African American and 43% Latino to 67% Latino and 25% African American in 2010. The enrollment also fluctuated from an all time high at 701 students in 2005, to its enrollment low of 494 students at the time of this study. English Learners at the school also experienced a fluctuating percentage over the years, with the most current data placing them at 36%. Figure 5 shows these changes over a 15 year period.

Number of English Learners for Ninety-Ninth Street
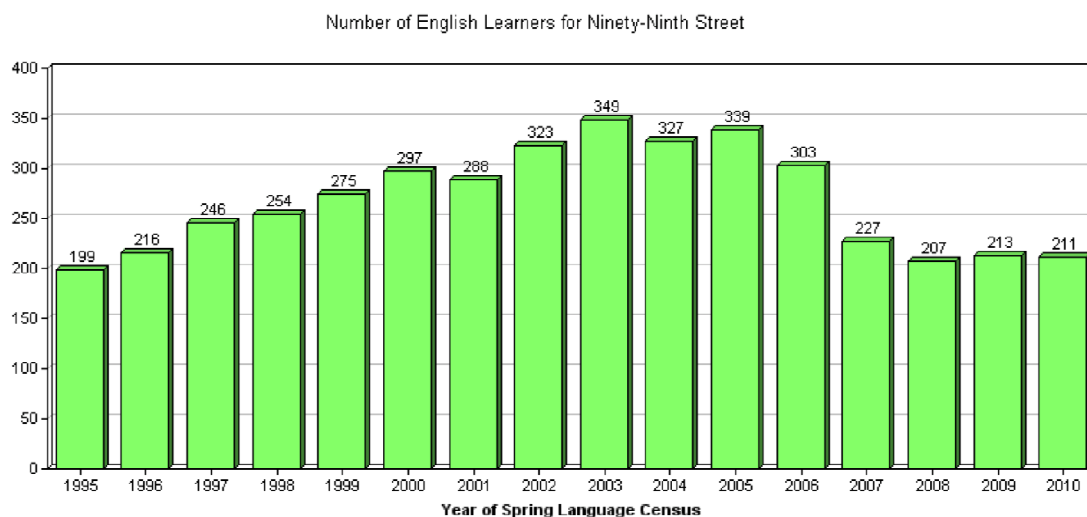
Figure 5. Number of English learners at Excellence Elementary School. Source: California Department of Education (2010a).

The achievement at Excellence Elementary School had been chronically low as far back as 1997. The state assessment tool then was the SAT 9 Assessment, and only 4.3% of the students scored at or above 75th percentile with 24.1% at or above the 5th percentile in English Language Arts (ELA). In mathematics, 8.3% scored at or above the 75th percentile and 27.2% at the 50th percentile. Ten years later in 2007, under the California Standardized Test (CST) the state's newest performance assessment, only 2.1% of the students were advanced with 19.2% proficient in ELA and only 11% of the students were advanced with 22% proficient in mathematics (LAUSD, 2011-2012).

By 2006, Excellence Elementary School had continuously failed to meet the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) as charged by the federal requirements under NCLB and they were in Program Improvement in year five (LAUSD, 2006). Hence, the school joined an ever-increasing number of schools that were failing to make the expected gains

on the standardized tests. More than 300 schools out of the nearly 800 schools in

LAUSD were placed in Program Improvement in 2006. In 2007, Superintendent Brewer

identified nearly 50 schools that were to be a part of a system-wide intervention known as

the High Priority Schools Program (Brewer, 2007).

Under the leadership of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, PLAS joined in partnership

with Superintendent Brewer and the LAUSD school board in August 2007, representing

another attempt for LAUSD to provide opportunities for innovation within the district.

Another impetus for making these swift changes was that nearly 100 charter schools were

operating in the district (Kerchner et al., 2008). A significant number of those charter

schools were being run by Charter Management Organizations (CMOs), such as the Los

Angeles Alliance, Green Dot Public Schools, Partnership to Uplift Communities (PUC),

and Inner-City Education Fund (ICEF). These organizations were rising due to the

dissatisfaction of many families with the traditional public schools in Los Angeles (Rubin

& Furedi, 2006, 2007).

The community of Excellence Elementary joined in the frustration of other

schools because their children were not experiencing academic success. Parents were

frustrated and fed up with what appeared to be the lack of care and concern for their

school and their children, and the teachers too felt unsupported, fearful, intimidated, and

disempowered as decision makers on their campus. These challenges, followed by the

stigma of academic failure based on district, state, and federal assessments, moved the

community of Excellence Elementary School to listen closely to the opportunity for a

rebirth by joining as a charter member of PLAS. Teachers and parents saw the move as

an opportunity to change the perception of them as poor stepchildren who worked hard and received little recognition for their efforts to a view of the community as a "Cinderella" story, where PLAS recognized the brilliance of both the staff and the students at the school. Ultimately, Excellence Elementary School became a beacon in the community as a school personifying academic excellence (California Department of Education, 2009b, 2010b).

Conclusion

School reforms have been informed by many assumptions about what teachers and administrators already know how to do and what it will take for them to carry out the reforms. However, researchers have recently questioned the accuracy of those assumptions (David & Cuban, 2010). Analysis using the CST indicated a possible correlation between the Five Key Strategies of the Partnership Model. The data may or may not demonstrate results that are worthy of review, analysis, and discussion; however through this study I sought to examine the data and establish whether there was any evidence worthy of study in the State's testing results. Additional analysis through the qualitative method of interviewing members of the PLAS community, Excellence Elementary School personnel, and a respected consultant expert in turnarounds, was reviewed and analyzed in an attempt to corroborate and substantiate findings.

CHAPTER III: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

> When we choose excellent performance as the goal,
> academically and socially, we change the teaching and learning
> paradigm in fundamental ways. By setting the required
> performance level at excellence, we require excellent
> performance to be articulated.
> (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2002, p. 134).

As stated earlier, the call for excellence in education began as early as 1787, when a group of Black citizens from Boston petitioned the state legislature of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Bay to provide their children with a quality education (Kluger, 1975). Throughout our country's history, legal battles such as *Plessey v. Ferguson* in 1876 and the landmark case *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954 continued the demand for civil rights and excellence in education (Kluger, 1975). Indeed, at the time of this study, LAUSD was implementing a settlement with the courts and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) that attacked the inequities in education impacting schools like Excellence Elementary School. In this settlement, PLAS also joined the efforts of the ACLU to address the inequities of teacher stability and chronic turnover in underperforming schools in LAUSD. Fundamental to all of these efforts was the cry for excellence in education (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2010).

The Five Key Strategies were utilized to both guide and drive Excellence Elementary School's transformation by embracing excellence, empowering all stakeholders, and providing quality education for all children. Based on the CST results, other public data sets, the interviews of key stakeholders, and my observational journals, my research posited the reasons that that transformation occurred and why student achievement accelerated at the school.

This chapter outlines the findings and analysis of the Partnership Model and how the key strategies contributed to the transformation and acceleration of student performance at Excellence Elementary School. The interviews revealed an understanding of the turnaround success as posed in the research questions that guided this study:

1. What reflections do community stakeholders have about the efficacy of the Five Key Strategies used by PLAS for the turnaround initiative at Excellence Elementary?

2. Do stakeholders at Excellence Elementary believe these were the right strategies? Were they the most effective strategies?

3. What are the stakeholders' perceptions of the implementation of the turnaround strategies at Excellence Elementary?

4. What can be learned from the turnaround process at Excellence Elementary that may inform other turnaround projects?

The Five Key Strategies

Each of the Five Key Strategies of the Partnership Model played a critical role in the transformation and the acceleration of performance at Excellence Elementary School. Through the extensive interviews that were conducted, my observational data, and other unobtrusive data, all five strategies emerged as being important. Three strategies were explicit and two, on the surface did not appear as significant because interviewees did not use language to specifically call them out, but were implicit as interpreted from the data reviewed. The explicit strategies, including Leadership and Culture, Quality of

Instruction, and Family and Community Engagement, were the primary levers of change at Excellence Elementary School. These three strategies were central to facilitating, integrating, and activating the changes at the school.

Findings Part I: The Power of Transforming Leadership and Culture

Speaking about leadership, Collins (2001) stated, "Leadership is about vision. But leadership is equally about creating a climate where the truth is heard and the brutal facts confronted" (p. 74). This section presents the collected data from the participants interviewed and my own observational journals as they reflected the transformation of leadership and culture at Excellence Elementary School in relationship to the Five Key Strategies of the Partnership Model. My findings suggested that the role of the principal was a key strategy in the transformation. The data revealed that there were five necessary elements in the leadership role of the principal that proved to be significant. A discussion of these five elements follows.

The Leadership Role of the Principal

The Wallace Foundation study of the impact of leadership on student learning suggested that (a) collective leadership (when the group is mobilized) is far more impactful than individual leadership; (b) principals' impact on student learning is indirect (but nonetheless specific) through improving working conditions (resources, focus, monitoring data, monitoring etc.) of teachers; and (c) in high-performing schools everyone's sense of influence and moral purpose is enhanced (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Given these conditions, people collaborate within the school, and they seek outside connections to help them and those on the

outside go further, and it is the principal who sets the vision for the school and helps the teachers understand it and work toward the vision (Chenoweth, 2009; Fullan, 2009).

The principal of Excellence Elementary School possessed a vision of excellence for all children and through this vision she was able to transform an entire school community by displaying incredible focus and flexibility and utilizing her communication skills to cast the vision with every stakeholder. Interview participants overwhelmingly described the principal as a critical component for the demonstrated success of Excellence Elementary School, agreeing that she possessed the essential qualities and characteristics of a great principal. They often described her as smart, friendly, strategic, open, tenacious, and welcoming. Upon entering the school, she deftly moved to mobilize the teachers, the parents, and families, and the broader community. The PLAS leader indicated that Principal Johnson was skilled as a collaborative leader who could guide the school toward excellence.

Leadership with a vision and core values.

As a participant observer, I spent significant time attending multiple school functions where Principal Johnson met with all stakeholder groups initially in separate meetings to work with the school community to establish the school vision for excellence and to collectively identify the core values that the school would live by. Following one of the PLAS Leadership Conferences that focused on the Gold Standard of Excellence, Principal Johnson returned to her school and immediately put a banner across the entry wall on her campus that said, "Excellence Elementary School, The Gold Standard for

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Excellence." I also witnessed her be a learner who was open to new ideas and not afraid to take on new challenges (Bass, 2008). One teacher described her by saying:

She brought together the teachers and the community. Usually the principal brings in instruction first, but in this particular case, she used her talent. Having a principal that knows what her gift is and one who goes in and uses it is important. [Principal Johnson] brought what she is good at and she is extremely good. She is personable, she got parents involved; she got teachers to buy in whether they liked it or not. She had everyone pushing for the same goal. (TG, teacher interview, March 28, 2011)

I also observed as she established the new school leadership team. In order to do this, she made sure that she identified representing teachers from every grade level, paying careful attention to teachers who were generally perceived as leaders as well as those who were not outspoken, but proved to be quieter leaders that produced results from excellent work in their classrooms. She created an environment where everyone had a voice and truly felt they were legitimate decision-makers, and she revitalized the school governance committees that had historically become battlefields between the administration, teachers, and parents where the environment was rife with distrust (Bass, 2008). The community collectively set up new ground rules for meetings that were public and transparent and that genuinely saw both teachers and parents as stakeholders and decision-makers. One parent said, "Now that I am [in] ELAC and CEAC, I get to know the entire budget, and I get to participate in classroom walkthroughs" (PG, parent interview, March 14, 2011).

Leadership building culture through community involvement.

The School Development Project, designed by psychiatrist James Comer at Yale in 1969, rested on the theory that children's poor academic performance was due in large part a school's failure to bridge the social, psychological, and cultural gaps between home and school (Comer, 1996). Thus, the turnaround of a school depends on creating a climate where a community of adults and children can work smoothly together to improve academic achievement. The approach emphasized problem solving by consensus (David & Cuban, 2010), which is the constructivist approach that I used in my theoretical perspective.

During the infancy of PLAS, extensive time was spent at all schools in order to gain context and insight, to identify the strengths and needs of the school communities, and to understand the history of the school by listening to the stories of the students, teachers, and parents. My observational notes indicated that as PLAS assumed oversight of Excellence Elementary School, the notes and data from the multiple focus groups of teachers, parents, and families were given strong consideration for making major decisions. Stakeholders expressed a strong desire for community involvement in hiring the new leadership. Based on this feedback, PLAS developed a transparent hiring process that included teachers, parents, and PLAS members in developing the job description, paper screening the applicants, and interviewing the candidates in community-based interviews. Through this extensive process, the community selected Principal Johnson as their leader in July of 2008. One parent, who had been at

Excellence for 6 years, said that there was a very combative relationship with the prior two principals and elaborated on the difficulties of the relationships:

> I was a part of the two principals being kicked out. We were not allowed to come on campus. Like one time I came to campus to pick up my niece, and the principal asked me why I was here and I said to pick up my niece from the after-school program. He said that I have to leave now or he would call the police. The police came and I asked, "Why?" I went home and cried. I did not like it so I started investigating the principal. I went to the board meeting and protested. We protested that we needed a permit to come on campus. We did not have good communication like we do now. We could not visit classrooms, no volunteering. We did the same thing with the second principal. (PM, parent interview, March 14, 2011)

Another parent said that she had seen a lot changes and that she was sad that her older son was not a part of the school with PLAS:

> We were not allowed to speak with teachers about our student, nobody paid any attention to the cleanliness of the school and there was a vibe that everyone was watching us. I did not understand anything about what my child was learning. Nobody ever explained that my child was low in anything. We just worked to get through his work. (PG, parent interview, March 14, 2011)

An upper grade teacher who had been at Excellence for more than 11 years shared that in her first year at the school she had a positive feeling about the school community:

I saw that the students were very friendly, very active, and I could feel the energy here. Shortly after I started here, I felt that I was swooped into a whirlwind of things that I wasn't aware of; there were a lot of conflicts around the school between administrators and teachers, between parents and administrators, and I felt lost. You had to make an appointment to see the administrator. It was not an open door policy. You would have to knock or tiptoe down the hallway to speak with the administrator. It made me very nervous. I didn't come into the office very much and I didn't ask many questions. Now I have seen a lot of change in terms of leadership. Not everyone makes *all* the decisions but I think that people are heard. Principal Johnson is visible. She has an open door policy. You can bring your ideas to her and she says, "Sure, let's try it." She listens and I feel valued by her. (TB, teacher interview, March 14, 2011)

Another teacher said, "She does so much in community building and she is very transparent. She goes out of her way to work with teachers" (TW, teacher interview, March 14, 2011). She went on to say, "I really believe that the teachers feel like they now have a voice. Now, the hot thing is to be on the School Site Council because now they feel they have more of a voice. They are the real decision makers" (TW, teacher interview, March 14, 2011).

Transparent leadership.

Studies of effective schools have consistently drawn attention to a strong educational leadership. Good teaching may be possible in a school where there is ineffective educational leadership, but it is harder to achieve (Fullan, 2009). Interviews

and observation indicated that Principal Johnson opened up every aspect of the school.

By displaying strong interpersonal skills, she offered a level of transparency that was

important and insightful on her part because the ultimate message was not only to the

parent community, it was also a commitment of openness and transparency to her

students and to her teachers. Ultimately, this display of transparency was instrumental in

birthing the transformation at Excellence Elementary School.

Before she started, Principal Johnson served as a vice principal in a neighboring

school for several years and knew about the some of Excellence Elementary School's

history:

I knew that two teachers had been raped, I knew that there were some security

issues going on and I knew from reading the paper that they [the school

community] had picketed to have not one, but two principals removed. I knew

that from the experience at summer school [she served as the summer school

principal] that the students had discipline issues so coming up with my

background, I had to put systems in place. (principal interview, March 14, 2011)

Given her knowledge, she knew that the parents wanted change. They unanimously

voted in the direction of PLAS because they sought something new and academically

supportive for their children. They all communicated that they dreamed big dreams for

their children's future and they wanted the best for their community. As noted in my

interviews with parents, teachers, and the supervising administrator, Principal Johnson

built trust with the staff and the parent community in multiple ways. She began each

morning, arriving at 6:00 a.m. often as the first person at the school, and, understanding

how much work was needed to put the systems and structures in place, she routinely was

the last person to leave the school, most days after 9:00 p.m. Prior to the arrival of

Principal Johnson, anyone entering Excellence Elementary School had to attain a yellow

sticker for entrance, and parents were often stopped, questioned, and turned away at the

gates. Because of this, parents and family did not feel welcome at the school and were

angry and frustrated by these exclusionary practices. Principal Johnson recognized the

need to change this practice by opening up the literal and proverbial gates to let families

feel ownership of the school, and she was committed to be present every day with all of

the families. She also made a conscious decision to be open and available to her

community. Every day she greeted her students and their families, she learned their

names, and she made herself clearly assessable (Bass, 2008). She stated:

> Once I had come, I realized that there was a strong parent group and the teachers
>
> and the parents were united. They had just voted on PLAS and so I knew I
>
> needed to reach out to all stakeholders and to begin developing those
>
> relationships. (principal interview, March 14, 2011)

Leadership that creates ownership and accountability

Within the school, the role of leadership was to help provide focus and expert

support systems for all teachers with a greater instructional precision. This needed to be

done while fostering strong connections and relationships in other parts of the system.

Although the primary focus needed to be on the classroom, school staff also had a

responsibility to be aware of issues and responsibilities *vis-à-vis* the larger system

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(Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006). Linsky and Heifetz (2002) stated that effective leaders need to have the capacity to be simultaneously on the dance floor and in the balcony.

Principal Johnson indicated that she quickly created structures to work with the teachers, parents, and students. She, along with the teachers and parents, established a calendar for the year with the dates for governance meetings, assemblies, open house, and leadership team meetings at the school. She stated:

So . . . I had to come in and strategize. First of all, I needed to build the trust of the parents to come with me now, because they know that we are all here together. It was not a war strategy but I would say, almost. I knew I needed to level the playing field a little bit. We are all on the same ground, the same goals, and student achievement was in the forefront for all of us. (principal interview, March 14, 2011)

Everyone understood that achievement was abysmal and the school had been in Program Improvement (NCLB) for six years. With a new principal selected by them, the community expected a level of immediacy of leadership by Principal Johnson in creating a new environment for Excellence Elementary School, and she was immediately on the ground working to build coalitions and create a genuine sense of inclusivity on the campus to let people know that she was in support of their aspirations. She was perceptive in realizing that she could not confine her outreach solely to the members who resided on the campus, and she recognized the need to engage many others, reaching out to the broader community. TW recalled, "We knew we were under the leadership of an extraordinary leader who did an incredible amount of outreach to parents and community.

Family engagement grew to over 40% and one time we had nearly 99% involvement."

She went on to say, "Then she reached out to the community and we had the Bank of

America, the police department, and other community outreach came in. That is unheard

of in many schools and this happened because of our principal" (teacher interview, March

14, 2011).

Parent and student roles.

All interviewees commented that Principal Johnson continued to involve the

stakeholders; there had never been the level of community outreach in their recent

memory and some staff had a combined sense of excitement and of being overwhelmed

by the attention that was being showered on Excellence Elementary School. It soon

became abundantly clear to the teachers, parents, and students that they all had a greater

role and responsibility in achieving the Gold Standard of Excellence. Parents and staff

spoke of the numerous positive changes at Excellence Elementary School that they

observed, including the principal greeting the children every day, welcoming them to

school, reminding them that attending school every day was critical to their success,

taking genuine interest in their learning by asking about their school work, recognizing

the great behaviors of students, and acknowledging students inside and outside of the

classrooms. She celebrated the successes of students in very public ways that lifted their

self-esteem, and this acknowledgement enticed other students to do and be their best.

Principal Johnson also used multiple strategies to bring parents and families to

school, such as spaghetti dinners, the gift of books to take home, and numerous

celebratory award nights for children, teachers, and families. She empowered all

members of the school community with skill and knowledge and placed learning opportunities back into the home by sending families home with books to read and with games and activities that allowed the parents to interact with their children more. These initiatives reestablished the relationships between teachers, parents, and students, which also aligned the roles for teaching and learning.

Teacher roles.

Principal Johnson also brought teachers together for the first time to examine the CST state data, the benchmark data, and the attendance data of the entire school. For the very first time, teachers were reviewing the data of their own students and the students of their colleagues in a very public manner. Principal Johnson then encouraged collective action of the teachers by engaging in an honest dialogue about the data, leading them to ask and answer three essential questions: Where are we? Where do we need to go? And How will we get there? The teachers then met consistently and collaboratively to identify supports and intervention strategies needed to accelerate student performance. In addition, they redirected the work of the classroom aides to become more strategically focused on supporting the teacher-identified goals for specific students, opening up more time for teachers to meet the targeted needs of the lowest performing students.

Principal Johnson also upgraded the instructional environment by providing every teacher with a brand new computer and document camera, both of which dramatically changed the way the teachers taught and supported student learning in their classrooms. The classroom instructional day shifted from mostly whole-group teaching to differentiated instruction that met the diverse needs of their learners. Once teachers

began observing the individual learning needs of their students, they were then able to establish benchmark targets for their improvement and they were able to use adequate tools to monitor achievement. The instructional energy became impressively contagious, allowing teachers, students, and parents alike to marvel at the growth spurts that were occurring all over the campus.

Teachers at Excellence Elementary School recognized that they assumed complete responsibility and ownership for the education of all of their students, and both the teachers and parents agreed that Principal Johnson worked judiciously and tirelessly to lead the changes in a friendly and welcoming manner, with the additional focused and empowered leadership that exuded an overwhelming sense of responsibility, accountability, and ownership for student learning. Indeed, TW commented, "Our principal was very strategic in getting everyone focused" (teacher interview, March 14, 2011). This clearly laid a foundation of excellence for the entire school community (Bass, 2008).

Findings Part II: Strengthen Quality Instruction/Intervention

Partnership Strategies

> Imagine a time in the near future . . . when people speak matter-of-factly about dropout rates and the achievement gaps are inexorably shrinking, when record numbers of students are entering college, and when professors are noticing how much more intellectually fit each year's freshman have become. Imagine palpable, irrepressible hope emerging in our poor and urban schools. All of these improvements result from a new candor that has emerged in education and a willingness to see that historic improvement isn't about "reform" but something much simpler: a tough, honest self-examination of the prevailing culture and practices of public schools, and a dramatic turn toward a singular and straightforward **focus on instruction**. (Schmoker, 2006, p. 2)

Excellence Elementary School historically failed to make the achievement grade in a culture of high stakes testing. Like most of the schools in its urban community,

Excellence Elementary School failed to meet the federal targets of NCLB, placing them in their sixth year of Program Improvement at the time of this study. Principal Johnson told me that she concurred with the Assistant Superintendent from the onset that a key to improving the school was an imperative necessity to improve the quality of instruction in each individual class in concert with the great need to establish instructional coherence that would strengthen the quality of instruction across the entire campus. My findings suggested that quality instruction was a key strategy in the transformation. The data revealed that there were five necessary elements that proved to be significant, including opportunities to accelerate achievement, structured professional development, instructional collaboratives, strategic use of human capital, and data driven initiatives. A discussion of these five elements follows.

Opportunities to Accelerate Achievement

Effective schools are coherent learning environments for adults and students. Coherence means that the adults agree on what they are trying to accomplish with students and that the adults are consistent from classroom to classroom in their expectations for what students are expected to learn. Coherent learning environments cannot exist in incoherent organizations (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teital, 2009). Principal Johnson said that she realized there were a few teachers at Excellence Elementary School who had demonstrated strong pedagogical knowledge and skill, and the multiple levels of data indicated that most teachers were lacking the necessary teaching pedagogical practices to address the diverse learning needs of their students. As a participant observer, I engaged in numerous instructional rounds and it often appeared

that teaching and learning were stagnant and boring, and teachers were on automatic pilot as they moved through the curriculum, paying more attention to the teaching of the curriculum than to the specialized needs of students. Thus, there was little evidence of vertical planning and teachers also appeared to be working in isolation from their colleagues, seldom meeting together to plan based on student data.

Principal Johnson recalled, "My first year I knew that we . . . although teachers worked very hard and focused on teaching but not on learning and so instructional practices, I knew it [learning] was going to be a targeted area" (principal interview, March 14, 2011). While Principal Johnson possessed many leadership skills, she acknowledged that the supports and professional development from PLAS enabled her to have a more skilled and discerning understanding as an instructional leader than she ever had before in her previous leadership positions in LAUSD:

> With regard to transforming school site leadership, PLAS was able to take 10 principals and just begin to provide that intimate environment and structure that focused on professional development for us with a focus on instruction. With our regular district we did more focusing on operations but you really don't move instruction and show gains with just operations. (principal interview, March 14, 2011

She went on to say, "You have to be able to provide supports for teachers. You have to know what it looks like as an administrator" (PJ, principal interview, March 14, 2011).

As a participant observer and PLAS' Superintendent of Instruction, it was my goal to provide an executive coaching model that was designed to be customized to the

site leader and his/her school. I spent a significant amount of time with each individual principal, getting to know them as leaders, learning what their individual and collective strengths were, and working to build strong and trusting relationships so that I could meet them at their point of need. It was also my responsibility to provide research-based skills and tools for supporting teaching and learning at their sites, which included an expectation for them to spend three hours each day in classrooms observing practices and supporting teachers with feedback. The principals were provided professional readings in order to be proficient in the research-based best practices, and they were exposed to similar schools through study tours of exemplary schools and classrooms within districts in Los Angeles, New York City, and San Diego. Additionally, I observed that all leaders and all PLAS schools' staff members were provided professional development that spanned the spectrum of subjects, enabling them to approach school improvement with a systems mindset. A few of these professional development trainings included themes like culture enhancing design and capturing kids' hearts; visits from instructional experts and consultants like Anthony Alvarado, author of *Instructional Rounds* and Sarah Fiarman from the Coalition of Effective Schools; and equity and excellence training through EdEquity and the Adaptive School Model. Regarding these initiatives, Principal Johnson noted, "PLAS didn't short change us, you gave us the best. Tony Alvarado, my gosh! A visit to high-performing schools in New York! Taking us around to see it and come back and get it implemented in our schools was important" (principal interview, March 14, 2011).

Structured Professional Development

The average teacher's experience was approximately nine years at Excellence Elementary School. Prior to PLAS' arrival, teachers had trained in and were well versed on the components of the district's adopted text, *Open Court*, for the ELA curriculum. Due to the district-wide achievement gap in 2002, elementary school teachers were instructed to explicitly teach the ELA curriculum with fidelity and they were instructed to strictly maintain the pacing guide with the goal of creating district-wide coherence. The PLAS leader noted:

> For the most part, the instructional practice was very low and they followed a scripted *Open Court*. They read page-by-page of the teacher's edition. No planning. No charting or evidence of co-constructed learning charts. There was very low student talk, mostly direct instruction. There were no classroom libraries, no student work posted, and there was no dedicated space for students to read leisurely. Most of the instruction at Excellence was whole group. (PL, leadership interview, March 22, 2011)

Teachers were also were aware of the instructional challenges. One teacher acknowledged:

> It's funny. I didn't even know what the standards were. When I first heard the word "standard" I wondered, what are they talking about? I don't even think I looked at a list of standards until my fifth year of teaching. When the CST tests were just given, I just gave it. The only other curricular emphasis was mathematics. There had been little emphasis on science, social studies, arts, or

music. I remember asking the administrator at the time, how do I teach science if there is no science curriculum or text? He said, "It's not important." (TB, teacher interview, March 14, 2011)

Through the implementation of reforms at Excellence Elementary School, teachers reconnected teaching and learning within their pedagogical practices and made more sound decisions based on their students, not on the curriculum. One teacher stated, "Now we have a coach who keeps us informed on instructional techniques. The coach is very warm and welcoming. We did not plan together and now we collaborate in grade level sharing ideas" (TB, teacher interview, March 14, 2011). Additionally, TW stated:

The quality of instruction and the culture is so much better; we are finally treated like professionals. We started getting professional development, like *The Seven Keys to Comprehension* [Zimmerman & Hutchins, 2003]. Finding those good strategies for comprehension allowed us to go in and practice the strategies and build our skills. I started to read more books and try new things beyond *Open Court*. We were allowed to think out of the box! I went home and said, "Mom, you are not going to believe what is happening! (teacher interview, March 14, 2011)

Instructional Collaboratives

Classrooms, schools, and districts are nested learning communities whose cultures are closely linked. Teachers who operate in compliance mode with their principals are unlikely to create anything other than a compliance environment for their students. And as a former principal in one of the Rounds Networks put it, "Principals cannot lead

collaborative learning if they have not experienced it" (City et al., 2009, p. 174).

Students are not likely to take risks, collaborate, learn together, or experience higher order tasks unless their teachers are doing so. Recognizing these nested relationships helps leaders in a variety of roles for leading learning (City et al., 2009).

At Excellence Elementary School, teachers reported that creating opportunities for teachers to learn and understand instructional pedagogy was essential to the success of the learning community. Also essential to school-wide improvement was the ability to provide teachers and staff with new and emergent effective research practices. The Assistant Superintendent indicated, "We changed how teachers at Excellence Elementary School thought about their jobs by saying you are valuable enough and professional enough to have professional learning"(superintendent interview, March 22, 2011).

Previous to this, teacher collaboration was not the normal practice at Excellence Elementary School. After, a small number of teacher groups made a public commitment to the community, the school, and the students. They genuinely liked one another and for the most part respected each other as professionals, hence they would meet after school to do planning. Some of the planning was supporting one another in the area of instruction and some was planning school activities for the students. Additionally, they would emotionally support one another on both a personal and professional level. TG noted, "The main thing that piqued the interest of our group about the Partnership was we wanted to have changes to our curriculum" (teacher interview, March 28, 2011). TW commented:

Principal Johnson worked with her staff in collaboratives to figure out what to focus on and then together they created a plan on how to do it with the resources that they had. They put together a doable plan; they worked with their schedules to create cycles of learning. They had lots of ideas and strategies but they needed to put it into a system. Intervention and acceleration is going on. You can see the cycle results visible in the classroom to this day. Everyone's name is next to their data. Everyone owned the students. We had to be very strategic in getting everyone focused. It is going to depend on the instructional quality, not just test prep. (teacher interview, March 14, 2011)

As the Superintendent of Instruction and a participant observer, I noted that PLAS provided opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning experiences on their school campus and off their sites in order to collaborate with other teachers who also taught in similar schools within PLAS. I directed PLAS to hold a series of mini-conferences by bringing in professional experts from around the country to learn new best practices in mathematics, literacy, project-based learning, equity, and standards based planning. Every teacher was invited to attend and PLAS provided a daily stipend for their participation. In the beginning I noticed that teachers first came to the conferences independently, seeking to improve their knowledge. It took much courage for many teachers to acknowledge that they needed to learn more and to have more instructional tools in their toolkit, but they really wanted to be successful educators and they were seeking instructional solutions. They also recognized that it was not solely the fault of students as to why achievement gains were not being made. By word of mouth,

teachers began to hear about the quality of the training and opportunities to learn from and with their peers, and the numbers of teachers attending increased. As we moved into the second year, I witnessed principals and teachers begin to encourage their staff, colleagues, and friends to attend as school cohorts. Excellence had nearly two thirds of its teachers attending the second Summer Institute. During the two-week institute, teachers collaborated and planned for the school year. The attendance to Summer Institutes increased from having about 75 teachers out of 800 in the first year, to over 350 teachers participating in year two. The collaboration continued to have a powerful impact on the relationship among the teachers across PLAS Schools.

Teachers were no longer simply concerned with their own grade level; they looked at the needs of all of the students at their school and they had a clear understanding of the big learning concepts that needed to be taught at each grade level in order for students to be proficient. The principal reported that teachers at Excellence Elementary School collectively and collaboratively strategized on ways to support students groups across grade levels based on the differentiated needs of the students and based on the skills and expertise of the teachers. According to Principal Johnson, teachers became strategic in supporting students, and the team effort and commitment led to student success, teacher success, and ultimately school-wide success at Excellence Elementary School.

Strategic Use of Human Capital

Principal Johnson had a lot of creative ideas about how to leverage the staffing supports at Excellence Elementary School. In addition to the 28 teachers on campus,

there were 13 school aides who had traditionally supported the school in various auxiliary

roles. Some of the support staff assisted with the preschool classes, some monitored the

halls and were out on playground supervision, and others had been working at the school

for so long that they managed their own day of duties, which could differ every day.

Principal Johnson stated:

> The culture was multifaceted because we had so many different relationships; it
>
> was hard to put it all together. I needed to focus everyone, including the teacher
>
> assistants. We were like a walking employment agency but adults were not
>
> focused on half of the children. We had a lot of people that had to do some things
>
> differently due to the budget cuts. (principal interview, March 14, 2011)

While I observed at Excellent Elementary, I was aware that the principal

scrutinized the data and found patterns in the data about students that had particular

instructional gaps, but she also recognized through the data that there were significant

numbers of students that were extremely close to attaining proficiency in language arts,

mathematics, and science. While this proficiency could be seen across all grade levels, it

was particularly striking in the second and third grades. As a result of this, the leadership

team at Excellence trained the teachers' assistants to work with these students and created

a schedule for them to provide small group instruction. This move allowed the classroom

teachers to work with the lowest performing students and the highest performing

students. As a result of putting these needed systems and structures in place during the

first year, the second and third grade students experienced more than a 20% gain in

student achievement. In the second year, the leadership team reprioritized their site

resources and provided additional supports to meet the needs of teachers and students at all grade levels to expand across each grade level in year two, yielding accelerated results and scores in all grade levels.

Data-Driven Initiatives

The student data became very public at Excellence Elementary School. Principal Johnson understood the value of using the data to tell the story to the community and to inspire them to be accountable and responsive to the data reality and to make the site-based decisions for school-wide improvement that everyone wanted to see. I observed that the principal tracked the data every month. She commented: "I am not going to sugar coat it, they [teachers] are a tough group, union based, and so they were used to having things their way for a long time" (principal interview, March 14, 2011). Under Principal Johnson's leadership, the entire school community reviewed the data together. For some teachers, they heard about it in the school bulletin or it was simply put in their mailboxes, leaving them alone to decipher the information. In the past, teachers were told by their administrators that they did not meet their target and they were scolded. As TB stated, "We were told that we were in Program Improvement. We did not look at data, it was that we were overall low and we accepted that; morale was low" (teacher interview, March 14, 2011).

In the first year with Principal Johnson, I observed teachers began meeting in grade levels and they were provided multiple data points, such as all school and grade level CST data, benchmark data, attendance data, and their own classroom data. As they became comfortable discussing data, teachers began to plan based on the results. Parents

were also informed for the first time and they were provided workshops that allowed them to better assist in their child's learning both at school and at home. I witnessed data walls that displayed the achievement of each class and every grade level in the main hallway of the school. The walls showed all of the data, which reiterated that the entire school community was accountable and responsible for accelerating achievement. There was another data wall that was called the Wall of Fame, celebrating those students who were performing proficiently and advancing their scores. The Wall of Fame had students' pictures and names displayed in the center of a star. In addition, every grade level had their students' performances displayed with bar graphs from the previous year, and right above the graphs was their target goal for the next year.

Thus, going public with the data transformed the school community to have a sense of urgency and a sense of pride for Excellence Elementary. Teachers shared that the parents were more knowledgeable, and they were proud to see the progress of the students. Thus, the teachers understood the collective responsibility for the performance of all students and worked together to improve achievement. Because of the data driven initiatives at all levels, there was a clear improvement in student attendance, from 93% to 95%, and teacher and support staff absenteeism greatly dropped off, with many teachers having 100% attendance. Finally, the overall scores soared for two years in a row, with a 54-point gain in 2009 and a 52-point gain in 2010.

Findings Part III: Family and Community Engagement Partnership Strategies

  The Coalition for Community Schools stated the belief that:

  A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school

  and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and

  social services, youth and community development and community engagement

  leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities.

  Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone—all day,

  every day, evenings and weekends. (Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003, p. 2)

Indeed, this focus on community bore out in my findings, which suggested that family

and community engagement was a key strategy in the transformation. Three necessary

elements proved to be significant, including empowerment of family and community;

parent training; and community partnerships and celebration of successes. A discussion

of these three elements follows.

Empowerment of Family and Community

  The Coalition for Community Schools asserted, "Using public schools as hubs,

community schools bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and

opportunities to children, youth, families, and communities" (Blank et al., 2003, p. 2).

This statement described the heart of the transformational reform that occurred at

Excellence Elementary School. Beginning with the vision of PLAS to include and

empower parents and community in all of its schools, Principal Johnson's talent,

enthusiasm, and relentless commitment to wrap as many supports and resources around

the school as possible resulted in the observed reforms. One teacher stated, "Principal

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Johnson has an unusual gift and talent as she brings an entrepreneurial mindset to the job. She is a long time community member. She reached out to every government body, every church, and every business and had them come to the school" (TW, teacher interview, March 14, 2011).

Principal Johnson developed a clear strategy to get the parents and community involved. The school had a small number of parents who were at the school every day, but they came to the school and engaged in discussing community affairs. I watched as the principal spent time with the community developing trusting relationships, and later seeking support in getting the word out to other family members that everyone was welcome. I also observed PLAS host a kickoff event at Excellence Elementary School, the goal of which was to introduce the community to the mayor and the mayor's schools and to welcome the community. Flyers went out throughout the community announcing the Saturday event, filled with food, fun, and prizes. The turnout was amazing with more than 300 families and community members in attendance. Additionally, the first year with PLAS, Principal Johnson mapped out a series of parent and community events that would bring attention to the fact that there were changes at Excellence Elementary School. When she realized that less than 45% of the 423 students enrolled had fathers, grandfathers, or relatives in the home, she and the staff did a massive outreach to get the community involved to come and read with the students at an event called Donuts with Dads. Firefighters, police officers, businessmen, fathers, uncles, brothers, and grandfathers turned out to the event, and 360 men sat down with students at every grade level and read with them. From there, Principal Johnson organized Moms and Muffins.

She also promoted an initiative across campus to challenge the students to read 15,000 books in year one, a goal that was exceeded when the students read 32,000 books. In year two, the literacy challenge was for the student body to read 30,000 books and the students again raced past the goal and read an astonishing 52,000 books. Principal Johnson also instituted Family Friday, where the community brought in an art program and an instrumental music program with violins, and community organizations offered to engage with Excellence Elementary School. One of the teachers commented:

> Principal Johnson does so much in community building and she is very transparent. The community outreach brought a lot of other resources; the camp in Malibu where 100 students spent a week in camp; the reading program and all the different community programs. They [the organizations] all came to celebrate the success of the students, believing that their program was the real reason for the success. (TW, teacher interview, March 14, 2011)

Parent Training

> Parent involvement is crucial to a child's learning. The more parents
> can get involved, the more children can learn. (Comer, 2005, p. 40).

Comer (2005) wrote: "Parents and teachers [must] work together . . . supporting development at home and at school . . . Parent involvement is crucial to a child's learning. The more parents can get involved, the more children can learn" (p. 40). Principal Johnson believed in this theory, telling me that success at Excellence Elementary School began with a small core of committed parents who regularly attended the school events. These parents generally came into the parent room and their time on campus was spent ensuring children were safe by serving as watchdogs for the parents who could not be at

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school. They also came to participate in a social environment that they could not experience at home, and some teachers would center the parent support on cultural activities and celebrations. Thus, the teachers sought the parental assistance by making costumes and asking them to cut and paste materials for special events at the school like *Cinco de Mayo*. The vast majority of the parents and families rarely came to the school unless there was a problem or a specific meeting. Principal Johnson indicated that many parents had expressed a desire to be involved; however, they simply did not know how to become involved, and they felt uncomfortable with the level of their English skills, their own school experiences, or because they had not felt welcome in the past.

Based on the feedback from the early focus groups with community members, PLAS developed a specialized parent-engagement staff whose main goal was to recruit, engage, inform, and ultimately empower parents to have direct involvement and control of their children's schooling and academic progress. The theory was that parents wanted the very best for their children, and once they felt a sense of community, they would willingly join in and become active participants in their children's schooling. I observed the staff launch a door-to-door campaign announcing to the community that the school was going to be supported in a new way and encouraging parents to become reengaged.

The interviewees all shared that Principal Johnson made a decision to change the way that parent night had been done. In the past, everyone was invited on the same evening during the fourth week of school. The goal then was to have parents come into the class with their children, meet the teacher, view the books on the desk that the students would be using for the year, and quietly stroll through the room looking at a few

artifacts that resided within the class. It was reported that less than 50 parents filled the

hallways of school. Principal Johnson, along with her staff, wanted to make sure that

parents had ample time to meet with the teachers to learn about the learning expectations,

so she scheduled an individual parent night for each grade level. She asked that students

remain home, although in case that was not possible she provided child care. She served

dinner on each night, hoping to entice parents to come, and for each grade every teacher

prepared a one-hour "parent-friendly" presentation on the grade level standards that

easily explained what the students needed to learn and do in order to be successful and

ready to advance to the next grade at the end of the school year. She wanted to ensure

that the parents clearly understood what was expected and that they were able to take

home resources that would provide extended lesson material for the home. One teacher

noted:

> I feel that the family component has really benefited the kids. The mothers,
>
> fathers, cousins on campus . . . three years ago, I would have one or two parents—
>
> now, it is packed. Parents are now lined up in the classroom. The kids now
>
> receive so much more support. My kids came back the next day and said, 'My
>
> parents played the math game with me and it was fun! (TG, teacher interview,
>
> March 28, 2011)

Parents were also enthusiastic with the new changes in support of parent involvement.

One parent observed: "Ms. Johnson first started out by having chicken dinners,

refreshments and cookies. She had the entire community! She also gave them additional

incentives like pizza, and prizes" (PG, parent interview, March 14, 2011).

I witnessed PLAS hold a plethora of parent workshops, including everything from learning about the state standards, to classes on homework supports, to providing parenting classes. Classes to teach parents English as a Second Language, parent conferences, and visiting college campuses were available to the parents at Excellence for the first time.   The parents noted that these offering encouraged many more families to participate. They came in droves. Parents clearly wanted to be a part of their children's school experiences. Through this concerted effort to include and educate parents, I observed them becoming personally confident and empowered. TW stated:

> I am fortunate to work under the leadership of an extraordinary principal who did an incredible amount of outreach with the parents and the community. Family engagement was high and she was able to bring nearly 40% of the parents to every function. (teacher interview, March 14, 2011)

Community Partnerships and Celebrations of Successes

Support for family and community involvement begins with school administrators. Their willingness to recruit parents and community members for school tasks, to listen to other people's viewpoints, and to share decision making provide a necessary foundation for all school-family-community partnerships (Williams, 2003). TG observed, "Our principal went out into the community. Everybody has a gift and this [involving the community] is her gift" (teacher interview, March 28, 2011). It was clear that Principal Johnson had a knack for engaging the community. She went to banks, churches, the local recreation centers, the city attorney's office, and many other foundations. She had more than 20 organizations engaged with the students, staff, and

parents. By her second year at Excellence Elementary School, I noted that the adults

were on the campus, mentoring, supporting, and assisting with the academic and

social/emotional needs of the students. However, while teachers loved the support for the

students, at times they felt overwhelmed with all of the attention. TB stated, "She's big

on bringing in community. And now we go whoa! Slow down, that now it feels like

there is too much community. It's a great thing, it's a huge transformation" (teacher

interview, March 14, 2011). Children regularly saw volunteers, fire fighters, and police

officers in the community and they recognized them. The principal indicated that some

children saw the police as bad guys; however through the community involvement they

recognized them for their real purposes. Further, Principal Johnson and the parent

participants reported that at the end of each year, PLAS hosted a community awards

event where there was recognition and awards for parents, families, and community

members for their contributions to the schools. This practice of intentional and strategic

outreach of the community had a major impact in creating the concentric circles

necessary for school-wide success.

<p align="center">**Findings Part IV: The Implicit Impact of**</p>

<p align="center">**Optimizing School Structures and Operations**</p>

The former Chancellor of Washington DC, Michelle Rhee, appeared on the *Tavis*

Smiley Show and was asked if she believed that investing money at underperforming

urban schools was the answer to turning the schools around. She responded:

> Let me be perfectly clear that I agree with those who say money is not going to
>
> solve all of the problems in public education. If you look at the data over the past

three decades, we've almost doubled the money that we are spending in public

education in school for our kids and the results have at best stayed the same and in

some cases have gotten worse. So money is not the solution to the problem.

(Rhee, 2011)

Although Rhee made this statement, my findings suggested that optimizing school

structures and operations was a key strategy in the transformation. A discussion of this

element now follows.

Overwhelmingly, the interview participant findings concurred with Ms. Rhee in

that they did not identify school structures and operations as a key solution to creating the

conditions for learning at Excellence Elementary School. Rarely did the interview

participants speak at any great length about the impact of the school operations and the

structures as the key strategy or the tipping point for the acceleration of academic

success. There appeared to be an assumption that the organizational expertise needed to

ensure that the operational needs and functions of the school occurred automatically out

of the context from the academic and social needs of schooling.

I observed that Excellence Elementary School was provided the following

resources as a standard beginning support with PLAS: school-wide summer campus

cleaning; a school beautification day, library sets of books in every classroom, a new

literacy curriculum, computers, document cameras in every classroom, chalkboard

replacements to white boards, murals throughout the campus, parent room remodel,

$100,000.00 in discretionary dollars for the school, parent involvement grants for special

projects, second grader GATE testing, autonomous and flexible spending with budgets,

teacher stipends for professional development participation, professional instructional experts, study tours in New York and San Diego, principal stipends above and beyond the district salary, and many other levels of customized supports. However, neither parents nor teachers cited any of these specific supports as the reason for the increased success of Excellence students (Bass, 2008).

While these supports to the school were not identified as the means to elevate student achievement at Excellence Elementary School, they did appear to have implicitly facilitated in the acceleration of achievement. Without many of these resources, the school would have had to spend an inordinate amount of time, resources, and human capital in bringing these supports to and for the school. The startup of many of these supports came primarily from PLAS. Without the leadership, support, and access from PLAS team members, the transformation may have been delayed, debilitated, or thwarted. The resources provided autonomy, flexibility, and opportunity for all of the stakeholders to lead, to feel inspired, and to recognize that a change had come to the school. Given that underperforming urban schools like Excellence Elementary School typically were strapped with tighter strings and tighter accountability from the central office of the district, the freedom and support to be strategic, innovative, and entrepreneurial were critical to school-wide success.

I observed that the teachers, parents, and administrators did not notice the impact on school structures and operations because each of them focused on how the transformation impacted them individually. They saw themselves as the key levers and contributors of turning around Excellence Elementary. It should also be noted that those

interviewed recognized that this turnaround could have only occurred with collective

group of people. The significance and value on human capital overrode the significance

of the money, resources, and flexibility that was provided by PLAS.

Conclusions: The Proof Is in the Data

As seen in Figures 6 and 7, Excellence Elementary School accelerated

achievement and created the conditions for improved student performance. The proof

was clear, for two consecutive years the achievement data soared, landing in the top 2%

of student achievement growth in LAUSD (California Department of Education, 2009c,

2010c). The principal, teachers, parents, students, and the community demonstrated that

they greatly improved school-wide efficacy at Excellence Elementary School. And while

the CSTs showed improved academic performance, the qualitative data that I uncovered

during my research suggested that the school as a whole was better off, functioning as a

successful community with more informed and engaged parents, teachers, and students.

Thus, though the work was not complete at the close of this study, the commitment to
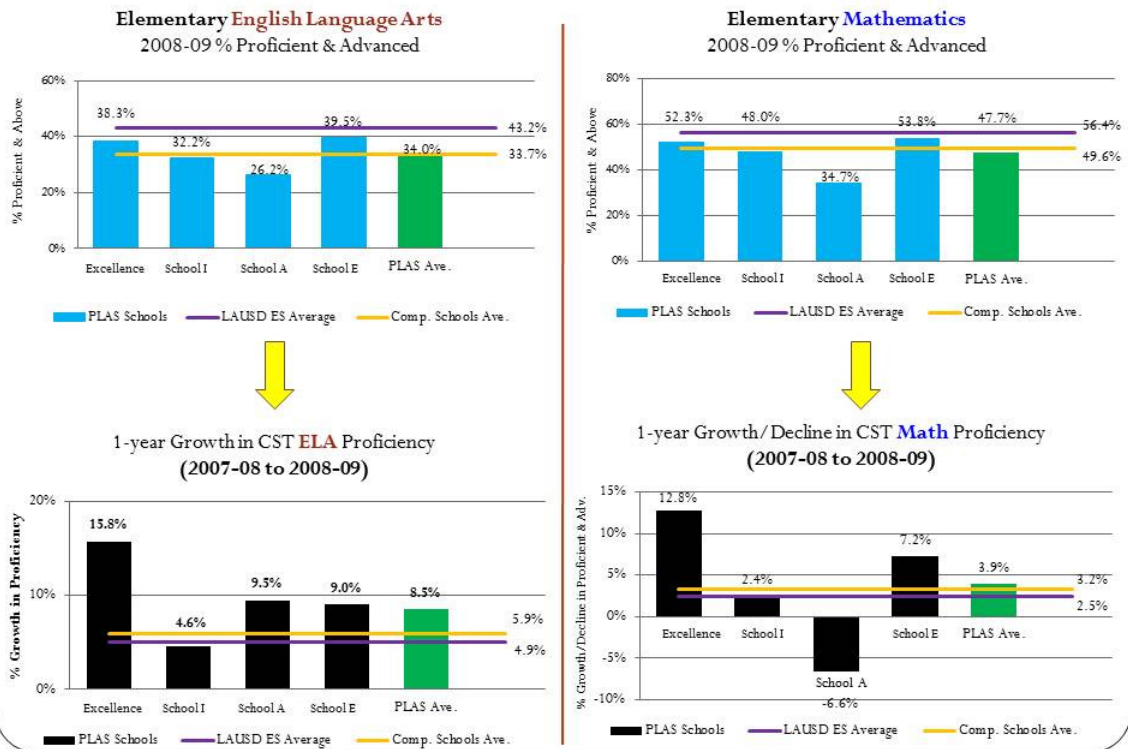
continuous improvement was echoed by all.

Figure 6. Excellence Elementary school CST performance 2008-2009. (From *Board Report*, Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, 2009)

Overall Suspensions Decreased by 5%
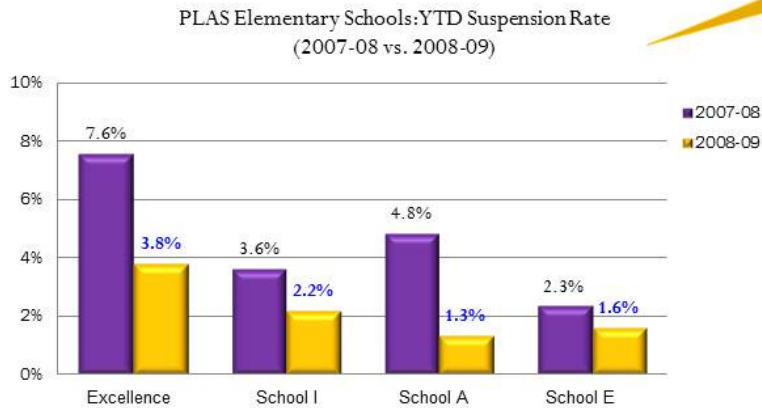
Figure 6. Overall suspensions decreased by 5%. (From *Board Report*, Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, 2009)

Recommendations to Inform Future Turnaround Projects

Excellence Elementary School did an extraordinary job in striving toward its turnaround goal. In two years, achievement accelerated 106 points on the CST, and in 2009 there was a nearly 20% gain in every testable grade, with nearly repeated the results in 2010. Student attendance was up to nearly 97% in 2010 from 93% in 2007, teacher and staff attendance was up, and they had a tremendous increase in parent and community involvement. The data clearly demonstrated that Excellence Elementary School, given the right kinds of supports, could accelerate student progress. The Partnership Model's Five Key Strategies were built on the recommendations of hundreds of school community stakeholders who were given a voice to find the solutions to turn around the school. The strategies were also clearly validated by research-based studies

from some of our nation's finest academic scholars. The community intuitively understood that the solutions to school improvement and acceleration resided at the schools. The Excellence Elementary School community was also very explicitly passionate and committed in their personal responsibility to improve themselves as necessary for the school community. The community desired a strong leader who would listen to them; they acknowledged that the instructional practice at the school needed to improve in order for achievement to improve; and they recognized that teachers needed to be given time to learn with a supportive leader and assistance who believed in distributed leadership. All stakeholders recognized that the relationship between the parents and the school needed to improve and that parents needed to be empowered with knowledge and skills in order to assist with their child's education. Finally, every group that I interviewed believed strongly that the students were brilliant and were ready to learn, and for sustainable success, school efficacy, and results, they needed to galvanize the community through seeking their active support and inviting them to be actively engaged with the school.

It took a visionary leader and a committed school community willing to do whatever it took to address the needs of the students. This was no easy feat to accomplish! It required the collective efforts of all stakeholders and a clear plan, and my findings emphasized that a turnaround could be done in a relatively short period of time when committed people were included and involved. The lessons, take-aways, and next steps learned from my time as Superintendent of Instruction of PLAS, along with the archival data and the interviews with each participant, led me to identify

recommendations that I think would be valuable to others working to turn around chronically underperforming schools. My study yielded six recommendations to assist in other turnaround initiatives.

Context Matters: Understanding Key Aspects of School Culture as Essential to Addressing the Underperformance of Students

The most complex of educational dilemmas in public education today is educating *all* of our students well. It can be simply stated that context matters in achieving accelerated performance in underperforming school communities, and I identified context as a key essential finding of this study. Educators have tirelessly sought to capture the secret to identifying key strategies for school improvement and have attempted to apply the strategies, like a one-size-fits-all method, in order to improve chronically underperforming schools in our urban communities. However, no two schools are the same. Every school has its own unique culture and must be seen completely through both the lenses of its richness and its challenges.

Far too often, large urban districts make the mistake of assuming that all underperforming schools are the same and need the same level of support. This could not be further from the truth. Each school has as assets the funds of knowledge of all of the people who reside in the community. The funds of knowledge premise simply states that "people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 10). Cummins (1996) argued, "Our prior experience provides the foundation for interpreting new information. No learner is a clean slate" (p. 75). Thus, critical to the turnaround of underperforming schools is

acknowledging the experiences, the knowledge, and the gifts that all stakeholders bring to the table and the fact that they bring solutions to the table that an outsider could never offer.

Each school community member must be seen as one of the million points of light that can illuminate both the brilliance of the people and the attributes that create great learning opportunities for students. It is imperative not to assume the deficit model mindset. It cannot be presumed that a teacher is a teacher is a teacher, a student is a student or even a parent is a parent; we cannot cluster the notion of income, poverty, race, gender, or even similar community dynamics as precursors for our sometimes biased assumptions. There is no empirical research available that implicitly or explicitly constitutes the need for the exact same academic, social, or emotional prescriptive needs for these communities where high academic performance continues to elude. Our children are brilliant, and they expose their genius to us on a daily basis and most of the teachers who reside in these schools appear not to possess the needed skills to meet the needs of their students.

Teachers and staff at Excellence Elementary repeatedly shared that they felt frustrated by their lack of success in the past, especially since they had diligently done what the local district central office and the prior school principals had expected of them. The one-size-fits-all approach from the district was clearly not meeting the needs of Excellence. This is not to condemn the need for alignment throughout the LAUSD system with respect to curriculum and instruction. However, the belief among site personnel was that these mandates were so rigidly implemented that the school was not

able to bring additional instructional resources and strategies to enhance teacher capacity and address the specific learning needs of students. Thus, they plateaued within three years after the district-wide implementation of the standard literacy and mathematics programs.

I contend that each school needs to have a deep dive analysis that thoroughly examines the history and archetype of the school. All stakeholders need to be interviewed and surveys need to be done to evaluate the cultural efficacy of each school. Clearly, data analysis is essential to ensure that there is a thorough understanding on the current reality of the school's level of efficacy; however, most pressing is the need to understand the why of each school's current status. There is also a need for a contextual reason for establishing the priorities for individual schools in the order of which critical issues must be addressed first. The priority may not necessarily be the same for each school (Datnow, 2002).

Secondly, a set of instructional experts is needed to be able to landscape every classroom within each school. The school may appear on the surface to be in bad shape, but it is imprudent to think that every teacher's needs are at the same level and that each is in need of the same supports. Equal caution should also be used to identify the learning needs of students without an extrapolated analysis of the school-learning environment. Every single classroom needs to be reviewed from top to bottom, beginning with assessing teaching capacity, the learning responses from students, the level of student engagement, and a review of the motivation of both students and teachers. Additionally, it is imperative to assess how many books are available to

teachers and students in the various content areas. Identifying the teaching tools that are

available and reviewing the classroom environments for students' needs are critical to

capturing a big picture and a narrow picture of the teaching and the learning in every

school. Establishing a baseline of the classroom teaching and learning enables the

identification of reoccurring themes and learning gaps, and it will assist in quickly

marshaling the right kinds of supports that will benefit the entire school community.

Teachers Matter: Excellence in Teaching and Learning Occurs By Empowering

Through Distributed Leadership

No one is more aware of the problems of failing children than those who work in

the schools. Almost every teacher and administrator has been disturbed, puzzled, and, in

many cases, disheartened over the increasing number of children who seem to be totally

recalcitrant to the school process (Glasser, 1968). Quality teaching and learning must

occur every day in every classroom. If teachers cannot teach well with precision and

with deep pedagogical knowledge and understanding, then students will struggle to be

eager and engaged to learn. Teaching requires ethics, a capacity to be critical, the

recognition of our conditioning, true humility, and critical reflection (Freire, 1970).

The training and expertise that a teacher needs to be truly effective is

monumental. The true appreciation for what teachers are expected to do in the classroom

is tremendously understated and requires a system that is responsive and insightful as it

prioritizes its resources. When there is an excellent teacher in *every* classroom equipped

with the essential skills, belief system, and high expectations, all students will experience

academic success. Critical to turning around underperformance is the assumption that

most teachers enter into the teaching profession to attain professional satisfaction with authentic intentions to teach well and to educate all children. It is the responsibility of the system leadership to approach underperforming schools and poor teaching with the mindset of good will. At the same time, it is necessary to attain a history of each teacher to learn more about him or her and his or her story. Thoughts, ideas, and perceptions are important in understanding the root causes of the "what" and the "why" of the school conditions in order to figure out "how" to begin to address the needs of the school.

For example, upon entering Excellence Elementary School, members of the PLAS Team reviewed the school's data and met with key stakeholders. The team approached the school with pre-conceived notions about teachers' lack of capacity to teach at high levels. Further we also questioned the viability of the curriculum used. In fact, we found that teachers were smart and did have the capacity to teach at high levels; they only needed to be provided with (a) quality professional development, (b) time to improve their practice, and (c) nurturing leadership that supported their growth. Secondly, the curriculum that had been put in place by the LAUSD had solid pedagogical practices embedded, but it lacked flexibility, and teachers were not allowed to use other support texts to meet the differentiated needs of students. Teacher quality should be evaluated with a three-tiered rubric that identifies strengths, weaknesses, and levels of connectedness to the student, parents, and peers. These actions can accelerate the process of pinpointing the focus and the direction to move toward continuous improvement (Bass, 2010).

Distributive leadership among all stakeholders, particularly teachers, is a viable means to high performance, and leadership needs to be shared with other members at the school. Ideas and input from school stakeholders is essential; the principal must identify, recruit, and develop key leaders in order to build capacity and to give voice to each participating member. Principal Johnson started with a summer retreat establishing a new vision and goals for Excellence Elementary School. Within the goals, she established an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) and a School Governance Team (SGT), in addition to state-mandated governance structures such as the ELAC, CEAC, and SSC. The principal expressed early in the process that the achievement of the school's goals would require the authentic participation of representatives from all stakeholder groups. This opened the door for members of the school community to participate for the very first time in a genuine partnership for the turnaround of Excellence Elementary.

Teachers, parents, students, and community members are leaders and they should be leveraged to bring their gifts and talents to the discussions for school improvement. Success comes as a result of people feeling a part of the solution, a sense of ownership, and pride in contributing to the process (Comer, 1996). This is true empowerment. Trusting that others can and will lead in the presence and absence of the site principal is a leading quality of an efficacious school environment. When teachers have opportunities to lead, they take ownership of all of the daily operations, which allows them to proudly represent their school.

In this era of school reform, too many district leaders have rushed to judgment in determining the capacity of teachers who reside in underperforming schools. Most teachers in underperforming schools are generally the least senior teachers or they began teaching at the school so long ago that they are now lacking adequate skills needed to meet the current student needs in their schools. In both instances, tailored professional development needs to be targeted, supportive, and differentiated. These teachers deserve a time of acquiring the necessary skills and should be provided with a timeline of support. New structures and support systems must be put into place, professional development delivered, and teacher collaboratives formed to allow for quality discussion and the development of trusting relationships, as authentic feedback will improve teacher practice.

When working with Excellence Elementary School in year one, many teachers pedagogical skills were low. They were paying attention to the teaching but they somehow did not connect it to the students' learning. As the principal and PLAS prepared for an adult learning plan, it was clear that the teachers were smart, caring, and committed to school improvement. It was exceedingly clear and wonderfully rewarding to observe how eager teachers were to advance in their profession and how quickly they majority of them improved their skills (Bass, 2010).

Community Matters: The Significance of the Human Aspects of Developing a Caring and Loving Culture

Underperforming schools cannot and will not accelerate performance without a strategic, sustainable plan to actively engage and involve the parents and the community

at large. Imagining speeded-up reform in the most challenging schools flies in the face of all that we know. A serious approach to the lowest performing schools across the country would acknowledge each school's context and the realities it faces, and it would make a long-term commitment to building the school's leadership. The study of Excellence Elementary School validated the PLAS' approach to turning around low-performing schools. As the turnaround specialists, we were careful in our diagnosis to determine the starting point for school improvement that had the most promise. We strategically built the skills and knowledge of those responsible for student learning, and we seriously engaged teachers and the community from the beginning in setting goals and putting them into practice (David & Cuban, 2010).

Parents are equally significant determiners in the academic success of students. There is a direct correlation between student motivation and school participation of parents and families and this relationship can have a direct influence on the efficacy of work within the instructional triangle of teacher, student, and curriculum. Most specifically, the research identified three distinct dimensions meriting attention: (a) school efforts to reach out to parents to engage them directly in the processes of student learning; (b) teacher efforts to become knowledgeable about student culture and the local community and to draw on this awareness in their lessons; and (c) efforts to strengthen networks among community organizations to expand services for students and their families (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton, 2009). Our parents are our number one customers and it is incumbent upon us to take this relationship much more seriously than once thought.

Prior to PLAS working with Excellence Elementary School, parents expressed that they felt disconnected, unvalued, and unequipped to support their children's learning. When Principal Johnson assumed leadership of the school, she placed a high emphasis on building relationships with parents and immediately including them in all decision-making at Excellence. During the interviews, parents conveyed that they had entrusted educators, sending their most prized possessions, their children, with the hopes, dreams, and expectations that their children would be educated well so they could participate in American citizenry. TG stated "Parents send us the very best that they have to offer with the universal hopes and dreams for their children to succeed" (teacher interview, March 28, 2011). It is important to remember that every parent wants the best for their children and they want them to be successful. The parents of the students want to be involved, but so many times they do not know how to, or they are very uncomfortable, for many different reasons, to engage with schools. Parents will engage if there is the right approach and when the purpose is meaningful to them. A plan is needed that includes parent workshops based on the needs of the community. When the environment is welcoming, nonjudgmental, and supportive, the parents will show up.

Community Support Counts: A Defining Element for School-Wide Success

Everyone has a vested interest in successful schools. When schools and students succeed, ultimately the whole community succeeds. When the community is involved, schools soar. It can be seen too often that underperforming schools do not have a mechanism to involve the community in effective and sustaining ways. An analysis of the school will unveil and determine the kinds of partnerships that are needed to support the school. Community businesses, organizations, and universities want to be involved, but many times they do not have an entry point to get started. Excellence Elementary School intentionally reached out to multiple community and business organizations such as LAPD, LAFD, Mayor Villaraigosa's Office, the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office, and CSU Dominguez Hills. Each of these community groups interfaced with the students, providing a variety of supports and assistance that impacted the overall achievement and the efficacy of the school. It is critical to understand the context to recognize what is needed for the students and the school. For example, Principal Johnson realized that less than half of students had men in their lives, which created the opportunity to reach out to the local police department and fire department to seek mentorship and support, and they were more than willing to assist. The relationships today are strong and sustained. Mapping the community resources and matching those with the needs of the school is an essential process toward identification.

Also embedded in an efficacious school community is the word *love*. Love is a word that rarely appears on the first line of any school vision or on the first line of any reform agenda or theory of change, and yet what is impossible to erase from schools of

excellence is that, without love, these schools would not be able to perform at their best. Educators struggle when the word "love" is brought into the mix of the conversation, probably because we have a culture that focuses on goals, objectives, and outcomes, which sounds far removed from the emotion of loving. However, the Excellence Elementary School community demonstrated genuine love for the children, as they were deeply involved in the fabric of the school and the supporting activities, such as annual kick-off, the school reading challenge, the after school enrichment activities, individual teachers tutoring students without receiving compensation, and parents spending hours making costumes for cultural events, among other things (Bass, 2008).

As a principal observer of PLAS schools, it became abundantly clear that you cannot teach a child that you do not love. Love is a caring and committed community; love is excellence on all levels; love is when the adults on the campus know the names of their children and their families; love is academic rigor every day in the classroom; love is when the curriculum is challenging, rich and relevant; love is demanding a child do his/her best; love is creating a safe and clean school environment; love is a willingness to stay after school to support teachers and students; love causes teachers to be at their best; love says that every child deserves an excellent education; love means that every culture is respected and a reflection of the diversity is present in classrooms and in the community; and love is the tie that binds the whole package together.

Stories Matter: Authentic and Sustaining Solutions Occur Through Listening to All of the Voices of the School Community

Learning does not take place just between the ears, but is eminently a social process. Student learning is bound within larger contextual, historical, political and historical frameworks that affect students' lives. This perspective is relevant today despite the focus on standards and high-stakes testing and accountability (Gonzalez et al, 2005). I purposely did not list data as one of the main lessons learned working with PLAS schools because while they are critical and key components to turning around underperforming schools, they are not a single story when capturing the essence of the school. This is a fatal mistake. Student data should not be confined to just test scores, which are only one chapter of the whole story. I must repeat that data is not simply a test score; people live with the data. Data has many concentric circles in attaining the results. Knowing the students and their life origins, their likes and dislikes, their gifts and talents, and their experiences that embody their funds of knowledge are all significantly important. Likewise, teachers bring their breadth and depth of life and academic experiences. Things like knowing how many years the teacher has taught or how many different schools a student has attended are important. Data begin with getting to know all of the people of the school community, including students, teachers, parents, and support staff. Who are they? What are their insights about the school? What are their beliefs about the school, the students, and the community? What do the students have to say? What are the relationships like?

Principal Johnson understood how critical the relationships were to the school's success. She set out to strategically make herself available to parents, students, and teachers throughout the day. She was in classrooms observing instruction for at least three hours per day and she created weekly opportunities for celebration where parents, teachers, and students could come together. As a result she was able to know and understand her school community in an up-close and deeply personal way. The teachers at Excellence Elementary School collectively shared a deep love and passion for the students and the community. This was very important data because the willingness matched with opportunities for professional learning made a big difference in accelerating achievement.

Many times top leadership identifies struggling schools and in their quest to quickly turnaround underperforming schools, they walk in the door with "all of the answers" and "ready to fix" everything. Every school has a unique persona, and until it is understood, judgment should be withheld. It is important to collect the data and listen to the stories to make the time to meet every employee individually. This does take time a good deal of time, but if everyone is able to have 15-20 minutes, the value to understanding the culture of the school will be accelerated. The individual will forever change the relationships on the site because it is uniquely personal and everyone has an opportunity to be heard. At the same time, the relationships must be developed and this development begins with opening conversation with the people. It also is important to hold focus groups and to include surveys periodically throughout the year. There should

be teacher groups, parent groups, support staff, and student groups where people have the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas.

When empirical data is collected and the story of the school needs to be told, it must be done as soon as possible. The site leader must collect the data so that he or she knows the data extremely well. There should be multiple forums in which the data is shared, including community meetings, parent meetings, teacher meetings, and student meetings. Everyone needs to hear the school's story and they must have time to discuss it. The brutal reality is critical, but the areas of strength and celebration are equally important. And this approach can provide the benchmark data for the journey, and when there is shared responsibility and accountability, the school will accelerate much faster. Thus, going public is a necessity.

Conclusion: It is all about Relationships

Bryk and Schnieder (2002) said that the distinct role relationships characterize the social exchanges of schooling: teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, teachers with parents, and all groups with the school principal. Each party in a relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role's obligations and holds some expectations about the obligations of the other parties. For a school community to work well, it must achieve agreement in each role relationship in terms of the understandings held about these personal obligations and expectations of others.

How the members of the school community respect one another, work with each other, and communicate with each other determine the health of the school community. Underperforming schools tend to have a lot of disconnected staff and an "us versus them"

mentality. Many times there is a marginal connection with the parents and families and the community at large. When people do not have a relationship with colleagues, students, and families, they are unable to influence the environment in a way that will improve it. It is said, "To know me is to love me." When schools are struggling and relationships are weak, a school culture develops where people do not speak to one another, some staff members isolate themselves, small cliques develop, and respect for one another is compromised. Another unfortunate outcome is that students become nameless unless they are seen as problematic. All members of the community are significant and when relationships are purposefully developed, the humanness of people is connected to their role and work. All stakeholders want to have a relationship that is satisfying and rewarding. As an observer of Excellence Elementary, within the first year an intertwined level of comfort and trust between the various stakeholders was developed, and authentic and productive relationships began to take root and yield transformative results. For example, student attendance improved, teacher absences significantly declined, parent participation dramatically increased, and ultimately student achievement skyrocketed, with API increasing 54 points.

Schools are all about people. A mistake that some outsiders make is coming with all of the answers and not having respect for any aspects of the existing culture of underperforming schools. Outsiders coming in to support any school, but specifically an underperforming school community, must be cautioned not to sanitize the culture by stripping away the soul and the seat of the community. All communities have histories. Whether we like it or not, school communities within PLAS are now in their fourth and

fifth generation living in housing projects. Some people find this fact abhorrent, sad, and frightening, but for the tens of thousands of former and current residents, viable and rich memories took place and great learning experiences happened within these housing projects. Without dismissing that their experiences were not without challenges, we must recognize that the community has a unique culture and a soul that lives and sometimes thrives.

School communities all have their own unique identity and it is arrogant to suppose that the community is without rich traditions, strong values, and cultural acuity and history that have been the glue that has allowed the system to survive. It is critical to remember that a struggle can be a strength and, in so many ways, a virtue that has allowed children in difficult situations to persevere in the midst of what appears to confusion and tumult in the community and homes in which they live. Relationships must be developed in order to foster an appreciation of the individuals and the community. Sometimes, in an attempt to create an anesthetized version of other schools, we rob the school, the homes, and the community of their hearts and souls. Indeed, we must remember that in prisons, everyone wears a uniform, the facility is sanitized, everyone walks in order, and all of the prisoners wait to be spoken to before speaking. In contrast, within high-performing school communities there is a "buzz" in the rooms, where students are openly and freely engaging in intellectual discourse and where questioning, laughter, and emotion are in concert with teaching and learning every day. We must constantly do personal checks with the community to ensure that we do not steal the positive strengths and nuances that have helped to establish a cultural soul and

personality that allow for the democratic and pluralistic society that our forefathers fought so vigorously to preserve in this great nation.

The qualities and virtues that prevail at high-performing schools are the same ones that should be sought after at the underperforming schools. Personalization with strong relationships between teachers, students, and parents is at the top of the list at high-performing schools. The level of interdependence at high-performing schools requires everyone knowing the game plan and having buy-in to become a part of what allows it to flourish. Principal Johnson held bi-monthly meetings communicating with all stakeholders to share the vision, the instructional needs of the students, and the allocation of resources to meet those needs. This strategy allowed all stakeholders to provide input and keep abreast of all aspects of the school's transformation. Everyone knew the standards, everyone understood their relative connectedness to all grade levels, and everyone recognized and embraced their responsibilities to the whole school. When truly authentic relationships are developed, reciprocity of care and support exists. Establishing purpose and interdependence on accomplishing the goal has an everlasting impact on schools. Trusting relationships reap many rewards (Bryk & Schnieder, 2002).

The most interesting results come from looking at improving and non-improving schools over time using a composite trust measure. In 1991 the schools that would eventually be identified as improving showed a quality of school relations over time. Indeed, Payne (2008) insisted that high quality human relationships are strongly predictive of whether or not a school can better itself. It goes without saying that schools with the weakest social webbing are likely to be concentrated in the neighborhoods with

the weakest social capital. The stronger the neighborhood's sense of collective efficacy (e.g., residents trust one another, feel the community is closely knit, and think they can call on one another for help), the higher its level of religious participation (e.g., belonging to a religious institution, attending such an institution, or talking to religious leaders) and the lower the level of crime in that neighborhood (Payne, 2008). Relationships are the "bread and butter" of any strong school community. Like Excellence Elementary School, relationships must be pursued and genuinely developed and nurtured in order for them to flourish into trusting relationships and to have sustainable and supportive longevity. No relationship, no reward.

Recommendations for Future Study

This study prompted a number of research questions that were beyond the scope of this research and certainly warrant further study in order to ensure the acceleration of student performance in underperforming schools The following areas of inquiry are suggested:

- A study on the correlation between customized professional development and accelerated performance: Teachers in underperforming schools range from novice first year teachers to teachers who have been teaching for many years, yet they are lacking in the pertinent skills to address the instructional, social, and emotional needs of today's students. The current practice of school reform is to document and/or remove teachers from underperforming schools rather than explore the possibility of utilizing resources to establish a customized professional development plan that would provide this range of teachers with the skills

necessary to meet the needs of students. For example, in LAUSD the primary

method of addressing chronic under performance was to reconstitute the school

under the provision of NCLB. Monitoring and assessing the correlation between

professional development and accelerated performance of students and teachers

may serve as a viable alternative for school reform.

- Principal openness and receptivity as it relates to school-wide efficacy: The

  research at Excellence Elementary clearly correlated principal leadership with

  increased student performance. A study that focuses exclusively on the leadership

  at a successful turnaround school would be profitable to determine the key

  qualities and characteristics that a principal in a turnaround situation must possess

  in order for the school to become an efficacious environment where all

  stakeholders are involved in shared decision-making and are actively engaged in

  all aspects of the school in order to attain high achievement and community

  satisfaction.

- Financial capital versus human capital: In an era of diminishing resources, school

  districts and schools are in a race to define the essential elements to improve

  schools. Administrators, teachers, and parents are all seeking to call out the

  critical components to turning schools around. When schools do improve, what

  are identified as the defining factors of the school's improvement? The current

  study indicated that stakeholders found themselves and others more important to

  the transformation of the school than the simple act of earmarking resources for

school improvement. A study that focuses exclusively on the merits of financial capital versus human capital would be helpful for future turnaround initiatives.

- Comparative analysis of PLAS schools to identify the different performance levels and implications: Ten original schools entered in partnership with PLAS. Nine of 10 schools demonstrated accelerated gains in ELA and eight out of 10 demonstrated accelerated gains in mathematics, and PLAS schools surpassed the district and the state on performance improvement for two consecutive years. However, only half of the schools accelerated at exceedingly high levels. A study and further exploration of the reasons for these differences would prove beneficial in striving for the goal to accelerate school districts and systems to scale.

Turning around schools is no easy feat. As thousands of school districts and school reformers across the nation work fervently and courageously to improve underperforming schools, it is imperative to understand and leverage the soul of the community. This will require that educators and reformers view the membership of each school community with an unvarnished lens that allows them to genuinely get to know the individuals, build authentic relationships and to assess the school mutually for its strengths as it does for its needs. Reformers must take into account the "good will" of the members in underperforming schools and understand the necessity to preserve the cultural aspects of the community. We must be careful as we make change so that we don't unintentionally anesthetize the community soul and erase the very important remnants that connect members to their community. In the end, parents in

underperforming communities send us their very best when they send their children to school. They also desire and expect the very best education, just like every other parent in America. When we recognize the brilliance of each and every child, when we honor the members of the community and when we are inclusive and collaborative with all stakeholders, we will accelerate student performance.

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