



# From At Risk To On Track II



## Four Factors That Support Success in Urban High Schools

Written by Elliott Seif  
and Dennis Barnebey

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**From At Risk To On Track II:  
Four Factors That Support  
Success In Urban High Schools**

*A report by:*

*Elliott Seif and Dennis Barnebey  
in collaboration with PCCY*

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# Executive Summary



# Executive Summary

It's almost an axiom – complex organizations require changes to a combination of factors in order to have a big impact. And there's no denying that public secondary schools in urban districts in the United States are complex institutions. So with some humility, a great deal of persistence, and a belief that we should be able to find and replicate success, a group of educators affiliated with Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY), a regional child advocacy organization based in Philadelphia, began to look closely at secondary schools with varied structures and forms – neighborhood, specialized, and charter – in high poverty areas in the city. Our goal was to determine whether there are qualities and organizational approaches across all of these schools that foster significantly improved student achievement and graduation rates.

In order to find out, we interviewed Philadelphia urban education experts and visited principals from Philadelphia secondary schools that were recommended to us because they used a neighborhood or a lottery system of student selection and had one or more characteristics that led to some success with at-risk students. We reviewed recent studies and reports that were designed to determine factors that help create successful secondary schools with high concentrations of at-risk students. We also gathered information about some secondary schools across the country that had experienced significant success with at-risk students.

Our review suggests four specific characteristics that can make urban secondary schools more relevant to students and thus more likely to meet students' needs. They include:

***A positive, success-oriented school climate:*** Schools that create safe environments and promote trust, respect, and positive relationships among staff and students have a better chance of attracting students to, and keeping students in, school. Success often resides in schools that find ways to provide good atmosphere, break down cultural barriers, develop an agreed upon set of rules that promote safety and relationships, and support good behavior. Specially-designed advisory programs, peer mediation, Positive Behavior Support interventions, concentrated use of counselors and social workers, and on-going personal attention beyond academic concerns help set a tone which says to the students, “We want you here. We want you to succeed.”

***Motivational, emotional and academic supports:*** Programs and approaches that motivate students to come to school and learn, along with academic and emotional supports, are also critical. Schools that offer visits to local colleges and work sites, provide teacher availability after hours, support mentoring programs, sponsor student internship positions in local institutions, encourage older students to tutor younger ones – all make a difference. Programs that provide behavior health supports are critical to help students deal with serious emotional problems.

***Adequate time for academic, personal and professional development:*** Increasing and/or restructuring time is an important factor in creating successful high schools. The “found” time can be used to provide extra help for students to meet academic requirements, work with students on personal development, and provide strong extra-curricular/enrichment programs. Time for teachers to work together on a regular basis to diagnose student needs, help students overcome learning deficits, plan collaboratively, and learn new instructional approaches is also critical.

***A relevant, coherent, “authentic” curricular and instructional program:*** Most successful urban secondary schools design or revamp their curricular and instructional programs to make learning more relevant to students, create greater coherence within and between subjects (often by a common focus on key skills), provide the remedial help needed by many students and create significant curricular programs and projects that will interest students in learning.

Our analysis strongly suggests that the presence of ALL FOUR of these factors strengthens the likelihood that an urban secondary school and most of its students will be successful. Implementing these factors successfully requires strong, mission-driven school leadership, with adequate resources and structural supports.

## ***Conclusion***

We believe that, in order to make a significant difference in the lives of secondary school students, the District needs to help its secondary school leaders examine, analyze and create models of success. District incentives and funding should encourage school leaders to find and institute changes, especially in the four areas cited above, to help all its students succeed. Providing funding for programs that motivate students, adequate tutoring and mentoring services; and “just in time” on-call services for students who need immediate help and support, even after school hours, would make major differences in the school life of thousands of youth.

The District, along with its regional partners, should consider developing a “think tank” where researchers and practitioners come together to review and learn from the latest literature, research and practical experience. We believe the think tank should pay significant attention to the four factors and disseminate information about other factors that have been found to lead to success.

There are no quick formulas or easy answers to improving urban secondary schools, but implementing the four factors cited in this report can have a significant impact. Success in implementation will require strong, long-term, committed leadership from all parts of our community.



# **From At Risk To On Track II**

## ***Full Report***





# Introduction



In 2008, a group of educators and researchers, working together under the auspices of Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY), asked the following questions: What makes for a successful K-5 or K-8 school in areas of high poverty? How do these effective schools manage to overcome the difficulties of poverty and urban ills? Can urban school districts learn from these success stories? In order to answer these questions, we visited seven Philadelphia K-5 or K-8 schools with poverty rates between 85 percent and 95 percent that had significantly improved PSSA test scores over the previous years and/or had demonstrated significantly high achievement levels on recent PSSA tests. Then we reported on the characteristics of these schools that we believed led to significant improvements and high levels of achievement (“From At Risk to On Track,” 2008).

In 2009, we undertook a second study, designed to examine the following questions: What makes for successful secondary schools in areas of high poverty? How can urban secondary schools help children overcome the many ills they are faced with as they cope with difficult environments? How do successful secondary schools manage to overcome the difficulties of poverty and urban ills? What can the district learn from success stories? Our goal is to uncover (discover) some qualities and organizational approaches of successful urban secondary schools that significantly improve student achievement and graduation rates, especially in the face of the urgent needs of urban students. Ultimately, our goal is to help urban school districts create and sustain relevant and meaningful secondary schools that meet the needs of large numbers of students who are currently not successful.

In conducting this study, we interviewed education experts in the Philadelphia area who have had significant experience with urban secondary education both locally and nationally<sup>1</sup>. We also interviewed principals and visited a number of Philadelphia secondary schools of all kinds – neighborhood, specialized and charter – that were recommended to us as making progress and who did not use achievement standards as basis for admission. They used a neighborhood or a lottery system of student selection. They also exhibited one or more features that helped them to achieve varied levels of success<sup>2</sup>. We reviewed recent studies and reports, many of which are cited at the end of this report, that attempted to determine the factors that help to create successful secondary schools with high concentrations of at-risk students.

We also gathered information about some urban secondary schools across the country that have characteristics that seem to support student success for at-risk students, and have been successful in graduating most of their students with high skill levels, who then went on to higher education institutions in spite of the odds<sup>3</sup>. We were fortunate to have three doctoral students from the University of Pennsylvania who helped us with our interviews and wrote a paper for one of their courses based on the results<sup>4</sup>.

# Characteristics of Successful Urban Secondary Schools

As we interviewed, observed, read reports, visited many different kinds of secondary schools and found exemplary schools, we kept in mind our findings from our elementary study and used the characteristics identified in K-5 and K-8 schools as starting points. Here are some of our key points and conclusions:

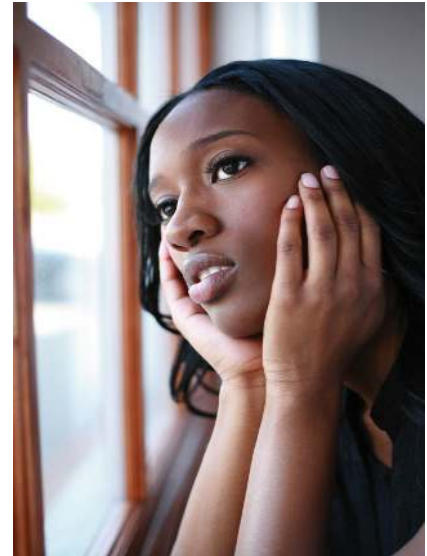
## ***Schools Fail to Succeed Due to Both Outside “Environmental” Issues and the Characteristics of High Schools Themselves.***

There are many reasons why highly at-risk students in urban environments drop out or have difficulties in secondary schools. We would be remiss if we didn't indicate that urban schools face enormous problems and challenges due to the outside environment, weak achievement levels and the many social problems that accompany the students in these schools. Some of the significant reasons for lack of success at the secondary school level clearly lie outside the purview of the school: poverty, lack of parental education, student mobility, achievement failure at elementary levels, lack of parental support, lack of discipline, language barriers, the lure of the streets, responsibilities at home, and so on. Recent studies in Chicago indicate that schools with “truly disadvantaged” students, “...where families were most likely to live in public housing, crime rates were highest, residents were least likely to attend church, and the percentages of children who were abused, neglected, and homeless were highest... have the least success at boosting achievement, even with a strong school support system” (Viadero, 2010).

Students provide us with clues that suggest many school factors are at play as well. For example, a study of youth who had dropped out of high school indicated that many left school because they found little opportunity for success, were bored and disengaged, and were not inspired to work hard (Bridgeland, et. al., 2006). The same study inferred that secondary schools were not providing enough help and support for these students to overcome deficits in learning from previous schooling and to find some measure of success in school. In addition, interviews and other research have indicated other factors that influence students to drop out, such as unsafe school environments and the lack of strong, coherent instructional programs<sup>5</sup>. Although there are many outside variables that schools can't control, our study indicates that secondary schools can make significant changes that improve the chances of high-risk students being successful. We think that there are a number of specific characteristics that can be strengthened, making these schools more relevant to students and more likely to meet the many needs of their students.

## ***High Poverty Secondary Schools are Much More Likely to Succeed if Four Characteristics are in Place.***

As we studied a variety of secondary schools in high poverty areas and interviewed experts and practitioners in the field, we came to the conclusion that any secondary school, whether neighborhood, charter, technical, or other, has to take into account four factors in order to be successful with at-risk urban students. Our results indicate that the strength of these factors is important in overcoming the difficulties from



the outside environment and significantly improving the success odds. In our discussion of these factors, we include examples from many different and diverse secondary management structures to illustrate our belief that it is not the structure but these factors that make the difference between success and failure. The four factors that lead to success are the following:

### ***1. A Positive, Success-Oriented School Climate***

The most commonly repeated phrase among our interviewees was, “It’s all about relationships.” “Trust”, “Safety” and “Respect” were all repeatedly referenced. Schools that create safe environments and promote trust, respect, and positive relationships among staff and students have a better chance of attracting students to and keeping students in school. Emphasis on creating opportunities for positive relationships seems especially important for a population of students who may not have such opportunities outside of school. The resulting positive school climate and culture breeds a sense of success. As one principal said, “A student may not like math, but if he (or she) knows his math teacher as someone who is looking out for his best interest, then maybe he will give it a try.”

In an era of zero tolerance, developing positive relationships in low-performing secondary schools can be particularly challenging due to the emphasis on punishment and rigid enforcement of rules. Success stories reside in those places that find ways to break down barriers, develop an agreed upon set of rules that promote safety and relationships, eliminate a “prison mentality” by creating incentives for positive behavior, and work together to create the kind of place “where we all want to be.” Students and parents, who under normal circumstances do not play a role in setting or enforcing the rules in many of these schools, are often included in the conversation. Students are given time to air their grievances or, in some cases, to share the difficulties of their lives. Specially-designed advisory programs, restorative practice training and circles<sup>6</sup>, peer mediation sessions<sup>7</sup>, Positive Behavior Support interventions<sup>8</sup>, concentrated use of counselors and social workers, and on-going personal attention beyond academic concerns, all help set a tone which says to the students, “We want you here. We want you to succeed.”

The creation of positive school climates in secondary schools is often no small task, requiring planning, energy and persistence over time. Some secondary schools have spent considerable time and effort developing a set of school rules and a “cultural model” that parents and students must “buy into” in order to be admitted to the school<sup>9</sup>. We also found that a number of neighborhood high schools have introduced “restorative practices”<sup>10</sup> to their programs. One school developed an innovative in-house advisory program involving the entire staff, thereby reducing the student-teacher ratio to 1:10. In those schools that have created a positive climate, serious violent incidents have dropped dramatically in recent years, a first step toward improving academics.

Unfortunately, our interviews and visits indicate that there is no systematic approach to developing a positive climate within schools across the District. Some schools have made great strides at improving school climate and culture, but our data indicate that they are “finding their own way” and not receiving much help and support in figuring out how to do this. Our interviews suggest that the creation of smaller schools and academies within large neighborhood schools is a step in the right direction, but smaller schools do not by themselves result in the requisite positive relationships and climate changes. The desired changes grow out of a conscious and significant effort that requires attention, planning and professional development over time by the school leadership and the entire school community.

While a strong, positive, success-oriented school climate is a necessary condition for a successful urban secondary school, it is not by itself sufficient to improve student achievement. Once a positive school climate is developed, other factors must be put into place in order to create the conditions for successful learning.

## ***2. Motivational, Emotional and Academic Supports***

Successful urban secondary schools also develop ways to provide students with significant academic supports, motivate students to both come to school on a regular basis, and help students deal with emotional problems. Examples abound. In many neighborhood secondary schools, students and teachers have worked together with the school leadership to develop programs that provide motivational, emotional and academic supports and activities, including: mentoring programs; student internship positions at local hospitals or other institutions; venues for older students to tutor younger ones; and teen courts to encourage positive interaction among grade levels. Programs that provide behavior health supports are also critical to help students deal with serious emotional problems, and many secondary schools have added services to provide this support.

Successful schools also make special efforts to motivate students by showing them concretely the potential rewards of hard work and the results of their efforts, such as through tangible rewards, special assembly programs, field trips, etc. Schools successful in this area seem to recognize that students need more than to be told an opportunity exists, but also to be given incentives to participate.

For example, at one Philadelphia charter school affiliated with a national model, students earn tangible rewards for following the school's slogan, "Work hard. Be nice." A token economy rewards students who are doing the "right thing" over time with purchases, sometimes of major items, at the school store. Trips to college campuses, as well as long-distance, end-of-year trips across the country and overseas, are part of the school's program and are "earned" through responsible behavior. Before admission, the expectation that hard work and good behavior will be rewarded is communicated through a parental interview, and parents and students sign a pledge to abide by the rules and expectations of the school.

One large neighborhood high school has created support group organizations to encourage success among African-American and Latino students. Meetings are held during the school day, with speakers and discussions intended to challenge these students to see beyond high school, set goals and develop a peer network. The leadership at another neighborhood school regularly calls together its top achievers, inviting them to special dinners and programs to help keep them on track. A Philadelphia charter school rewards its students through merit (as well as demerit) cards when they behave according to the values of the school. Respectful behavior is taught and reinforced consistently through concrete recognition on a daily and weekly basis. Filled merit cards result in special privileges and participation in field trips. Students needing academic support are expected to take part in "last period of the day" and/or Saturday classes.

Finally, a Philadelphia secondary school with ties to a national model is run on the philosophy that a primary motivator for students are their interests, and that a significant role of the school is to help them discover their interests and then work with them so that they can explore what they are most passionate about. The focus on standardized curricula is reduced in order to incorporate interest-related, student-centered projects, supervised by an advisor who works with the students during his/her entire four years. The projects, along with related internships and coursework, become the basis of learning essential skills that keep students inspired to finish high school and move on to higher level education in large numbers.

Another critical theme supported by our data is the need for students, over time, to make strong connections and develop relationships with one or more members of the professional staff or trusted volunteers. Many students in urban areas need these one-to-one connections to help them work out their problems and provide support in times of critical need. The School District of Philadelphia recently hired a significant number of new counselors, thus enabling these schools to provide greater opportunities for adult support to their students.



Many neighborhood secondary schools have also created support for students by implementing “classroom meetings”<sup>11</sup> in homerooms, so students and teachers can discuss issues and problems on a regular basis. One secondary charter school requires teachers to carry cell phones with them in the evenings and for students to call a teacher if they are having problems with their homework or are in some kind of trouble (the slogan “No Excuses” is put into practice this way). Another school creates advisor/advisee groups of no more than 14 students that are maintained throughout the four years of their high school experience.



### ***3. Adequate Time for Academic, Personal and Professional Development***

As the demands placed on schools to improve academic achievement and address roadblocks to learning have increased, so has the pressure on available time within the school day. A professional teaching community needs collaborative planning time. Students, especially those inadequately prepared for high school, often need more instructional time. Special programs also require additional time.

A fresh look at the time available to meet these demands by increasing and/or restructuring time is an important factor in creating successful high schools. For schools working within the regular time structure of the school system, extra time is often created through after school or extended day programs available to students. Some successful high schools structure additional required time for students. The days are longer (as long as 7:30am to 5:00pm), and Saturday classes and special events are often included in the schedule. The extra time is used for special academic work (e.g. working with thinking skills), extra help for students to meet academic requirements, working with students on personal development needs, and providing a strong extra curricular/enrichment program. Some schools also have required summer sessions for students built into their schedules.

Other efforts have been made to adjust the available time for instruction, as well as for teacher collaboration, without officially extending the day. Block scheduling has the advantage of doubling the amount of time available to teach students during a single semester, reducing the number of preparations teachers have during a semester, and also reducing the number of students on a teacher’s roster by half at any one time. Many teachers find this arrangement allows for more in-depth learning and individual student support. However, the cost of hiring additional staff required in the block roster has eliminated it from most Philadelphia public schools, though a single, modified block (one extended period) does exist in many. Some comprehensive high schools have created ninth grade academies – groups of students working with teams of teachers for the entire year – that can more easily reorganize time to allow for an interdisciplinary learning and skills focus, as well as significant academic and personal student interventions. The ninth grade academies help to lay the foundation for success for the remainder of the high school experience and can sometimes offer greater opportunities for teacher collaboration and flexible scheduling because of the single-grade focus.

While most schools continue to function with a set number of periods during the day, one school identified with a national approach seems to offer the most radical reorganization of instructional time. In order to allow for students to develop research projects around their interests and for student internships based on these interests, there are no periods – students learn all subjects from their advisor during the school day and can spend full days in their internships.

Giving teachers a chance to work together on a regular basis to diagnose student needs, work collaboratively on curriculum and instruction issues, formulate common approaches to help students overcome learning deficits, and learn new instructional approaches is critical to creating successful urban secondary schools. Recognizing this need, in the 2009-10 school year, the School District of Philadelphia mandated a long-requested, common planning time in many of its high schools to allow for more interaction among teachers and for needed time to determine necessary student interventions. Some schools have organized the use of this time to make sure teachers collaborate each school day in order to improve differentiated instruction and student support. Another approach to increase teacher collaboration and planning is through the use of “banked time.” A school’s instructional day is extended for a few minutes, with the accumulated minutes “paid back” with early dismissals that are used for professional development, collaborative initiatives or, in some cases, additional programming for students.

Some schools create “professional learning communities” so that teachers have the time to grow and innovate. They consciously build in significant blocks of time for teachers to collaborate on curricular and instructional issues. One high school in another city sets aside days within its calendar for teachers to review student work. Another sets aside significant amounts of time for teachers to collaborate, encouraging teachers to develop and try out new ideas and approaches that will help students succeed.

#### ***4. A Relevant, Coherent, “Authentic” Curricular and Instructional Program***

Most successful urban secondary schools revamp their curricular and instructional programs so as to make learning more relevant to students, create greater coherence within and between subjects (often by a common focus on key skills), provide the remedial help sorely needed by many students, and create programs that will interest students in learning<sup>12</sup>.

Many educational experts also consider “authentic” learning as critical for successful achievement. Authentic learning begins with a question, idea, task or project that is relevant, interesting, and contains some “real life” element in it. For example, a special program at one neighborhood high school had students designing and building award-winning automobiles that reach top speeds and use minimal fuel. This is a “real life” problem application of science, math, history and communication skills, in a highly competitive and useful learning environment that engages students who have not necessarily had a good track record in school. Their national awards have gained the attention of schools such as MIT and manufacturers such as General Motors. Other high schools have redesigned their curriculum so that most units of study are focused around essential questions, culminating with authentic tasks or projects.

Unfortunately, many interviewees suggested that the current standardized curricular and instructional programs in Philadelphia public schools don’t provide enough opportunities to revamp the curriculum so as to make it more likely to work with highly at risk students. There is an often-expressed frustration with the district-wide mandated core curriculum in Philadelphia high schools because of the need to “keep up” and sometimes teach from a rigid and, to some, impractical curriculum, while at the same time making up for academic deficits. Some strong curricular and instructional programs, such as a highly successful “school within a school” created at a local high school that emphasized the use of essential questions, interdisciplinary projects, and portfolios of student work, have gone by the wayside, primarily due to the emphasis on a uniform approach to curricular implementation. In spite of these restrictions, many schools have worked hard to develop strong, coherent curricular programs that engage students and also provide help and support for students who lag behind in both skills and background knowledge. In some comprehensive high schools ninth grade academies provide the opportunity for teachers to work closely together and provide extra support, help and intensive interdisciplinary programs to upgrade skills and build background knowledge for their students.

Some schools have created significant and innovative programs to support students, such as through the use of the Reading Apprenticeship model<sup>13</sup>. Still other schools have added Advanced Placement courses, based on student interest, that are designed to strengthen and upgrade the academic program. One Philadelphia principal of a neighborhood high school recognized the need to foster a more “inquiry-oriented” approach to teaching and learning in the school in order to engage students in the learning process. He saw the importance of challenging students to think and answer questions rather than simply covering material in a text. He was seeing good results of these efforts in retaining interest and motivating students to come to class.

Many successful secondary schools working with at-risk students put a primary emphasis on regularly collecting assessment data from students and using the data to improve instruction. They continually collect and review “formative data” in order to assess student learning, and then use this data to create individualized learning opportunities that help students “catch up” and improve skills. For example, a key feature of Harlem Village Academies is that it provides “frequent, diagnostic assessment of student progress that enables teachers to check how students are doing and customize instruction or tutoring groups accordingly.” The School District of Philadelphia expects its six-week benchmark tests to be used for diagnosing student progress and developing ways to support student success, but the pressure of a fast-paced curriculum makes their effective use difficult. The newly created common planning time in schools offers an opportunity for collegial review and discussion of diagnostic, formative, and other assessment tools as aids in developing stronger instructional strategies.

### ***Successful Urban Schools Have Strong, Mission-Driven School Leadership, with Adequate Resources and Structural Supports***



Effective leaders of urban secondary schools are mission-driven – they have a vision and direction for the school, and work hard to insure that the characteristics of successful schools are put into practice. They continually work on improving all four of the areas that create success: building a strong positive culture; providing motivational, emotional and academic supports and activities; finding time for academic, personal and professional development; and redesigning the curriculum for coherence, relevance and authenticity.

Many of the more successful secondary schools have developed a “framework” for success that focuses on how to incorporate these characteristics into their schools and maintain and improve them over time.

Effective leaders seem to be able to walk the delicate balance between holding a staff accountable for its work and listening and engaging teachers and their students in school improvement. One principal who emphasized the importance of building “relational trust” among all members of the school community suggested that it has helped transform a negative climate into a more positive solution-oriented one. Effective leaders recognize the importance of creating “professional communities” which give teachers the necessary tools and latitude to become effective problem-solvers. It is the effective leaders who are able to find the resources (partnerships, materials) and create the conditions (positive climate, effective staff development, instructional supports, incentives for success), so that teaching can be most effective. Effective leaders give significant support to a professional community’s work, value the input of each member of that community, and find ways to support the work that needs to be done. They are able to engage school staff in answering the key question, “What will it take to help our students become successful learners?” and provide a school structure that supports teachers as they help students learn and grow.



# Final Thoughts and Conclusions



In Philadelphia, in recent years, efforts have been and are being made to improve secondary education. One way that improvements were made was to create a choice-based student selection system with new and transformed secondary schools. Some of these schools are charter schools, others are specialized or a form of magnet schools. The District created a system in which students are invited to apply to many of these schools for admission. Many of these schools have screening procedures to assure that attending students have a minimal level of academic skills and interest in their program. Other schools select students by lottery. By contrast, neighborhood schools are required to take any student who lives within their boundaries, including those who either do not get selected to the application schools or have extremely low skills and academic motivation. A recent report from Research for Action revealed that the majority of Philadelphia youth who applied for admission to these newer, alternative high schools were rejected, leaving the neighborhood high school as their only choice.

This system has improved educational opportunity for many students who are accepted to the special selection schools. These schools also often have the advantage of support from parents or guardians who allow or even encourage their sons or daughters to apply to them. Application-based secondary schools also have the ability to ask these students to leave if they don't perform well or are disruptive, though many of these schools strive to avoid this last resort. But the test results of schools of choice also demonstrate that simply having a choice does not guarantee success. Some of the choice schools do no better, or only slightly better, in improving test scores or dropout rates than do neighborhood schools. And choice options create a system whereby the neighborhood schools are at a major disadvantage, since many students with strong academic skills and motivated families often end up in other schools.

Given all these differences among schools and the problems they face, our study took a different approach. We looked at schools with varied school structures and asked the following questions: if we look across secondary schools that take students by neighborhood or lottery, what factors emerge that help these schools improve and become successful? Even if schools are not completely successful, what characteristics seem to make some difference in the lives of students and in their academic success?

Out of our interviews and visits to different schools, observations, data collection, and review of many studies, we came to the conclusion that four factors must be in place for secondary schools to make a major, positive difference in the lives of students who come from difficult environments:

- A positive, success-oriented school climate.
- Motivational, emotional and academic supports and activities.
- Adequate time for academic, personal and professional development.
- A relevant, coherent, authentic curricular and instructional program.

Our analysis also seems to support the idea that having several of these characteristics in place is not enough to enable many at-risk urban students to succeed. We believe that ALL FOUR need to be present in strong ways in order for an urban secondary school and most of its students to be successful.

We are pleased to report that many different types of secondary schools we visited and learned about have developed structures, frameworks, cultures and leadership that enable them to implement one or more of these four characteristics, and even improve upon them over time. In addition, the School District of Philadelphia has begun to develop some programs that are designed to help schools improve in these four areas.

For example, in 2008, the District applied for and received a \$42 million dollar grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to plan and implement programs in seven large neighborhood high schools that focused on, among other things, developing positive school environments, improving mentoring programs, motivating students through internships, integrating work-related content into the core curriculum, developing common planning time and instructional coaching, and providing comprehensive support systems to students in need. Four additional schools supported by this grant were added in 2009. The first year of the grant (2008-09) was used for planning, and implementation began during the 09-10 school year. While the results of these efforts are still unclear, it is heartening to see that this major additional funding is supporting changes tied to all four of the factors stressed in this report.

Although efforts have been and are being made to improve secondary schools in Philadelphia through choice and new programs, our study indicates that all four of these characteristics are rarely in place in most secondary schools. We believe that the absence of support for implementing these factors is a primary reason that so many urban secondary schools have not been successful in significantly improving achievement levels or stemming the dropout rate. There are many forces affecting urban secondary schools that inhibit their success, including a lack of leadership; inadequate resources and personnel; structural obstacles (time limits, bell schedules, a seven-period day); a too-intent focus on “keeping up” with an overcrowded, standardized curriculum, and the next round of tests; the size of schools (both number of students in a building as well as the number of students for which each teacher is responsible); a top-down bureaucracy which does not encourage school-based creative problem-solving; and fragmented efforts to make improvements.

Unfortunately, most of our secondary schools still struggle greatly to develop strong school cultures, motivate students, build coherent, authentic curricula, provide students with “just in time” emotional and academic help and support, and reconfigure the amount and use of time.

# Recommendations



# Recommendations

*Based on our analysis and conclusions, we recommend the following:*

**1. Strengthen elementary and middle school programs:** While we believe that improving the four characteristics of effective secondary schools and developing the leadership that supports them can make a significant difference, we must consider strengthening elementary and middle school programs. All students should come to high schools with strong skills and background knowledge for success. Our earlier report includes recommendations on how to do this (“From At Risk to On Track,” 2008, available at: [www.pccy.org](http://www.pccy.org) > Publications).

**2. Using the four factors cited in this report, the District’s leadership should encourage, enable and engage each school’s staff, with its broader school community, to examine and analyze successful models here and across the country, to create their own map to success:** Cross-school visits and collaboration should be supported as part of an unflinching look at “what works” in order to improve outcomes in all secondary school settings with numbers of highly at-risk students. The District should provide the financial resources and incentives to help schools develop a coherent and comprehensive approach to improving the school and to enable them to adopt the components of successful programs. All secondary schools in the District should be expected to:

- Create a framework for helping build positive climates and relationships. Schools should be encouraged to develop discussions on how to implement these initiatives and be provided with appropriate incentives and resources.
- Examine, collect and implement highly effective ways to motivate and engage at-risk students in school and community activities, and provide concrete experiences that help students imagine and create future goals.
- Determine and provide the time needed for staff collaboration to improve teaching, design curriculum and increase student support. Finding the considerable time necessary for this work and using it optimally are essential and will require ongoing conversation between the District, schools and teacher unions.
- Develop ways to increase time for academic and emotional supports for students. Tutoring, mentoring, structured advisories, peer mediation activities and other opportunities to help students should be encouraged. Careful use of available resources (counselors, social workers, behavioral health providers, etc.) should participate in a unified approach in each school.
- Examine ways to revamp the school curriculum. The District should provide schools with a list of alternative curricular and instructional programs that demonstrate effectiveness in urban schools and motivate students to learn.
- Develop or purchase alternative curricula if they are able to show good reason why the program should be implemented. The District should assure that every secondary school has a range of appropriate and desirable enrichment and extra-curricular programs to increase interest in attending school and in learning.

**3. Provide secondary school leaders with continual opportunities to explore the key characteristics of successful schools for at-risk students and discuss how to implement these characteristics.** The District should work with these leaders both collaboratively and one-on-one to listen to their problems, provide support with additional resources when necessary, and help them in developing “distributed leadership”<sup>14</sup> and in overcoming obstacles. Gradual, long term improvements and results should be the goal of this work.

**4. Create an effective secondary school think tank.** Everyone in the region has a stake in reducing drop-outs and developing higher achievement levels among the young people who grow up here. The District should play a leading, forward-thinking role by establishing, as part of its secondary schools office, a think tank to continue to review the latest literature on effective schools, examine all secondary schools for replicable programs and initiatives, and convene discussions with educators across the city and region about how we can best improve results. This approach provides an opportunity for the District to take the lead in providing a clearing house for research and creating opportunities for wide-ranging ongoing discussions on viable, effective programs and models of success for our schools and students. The think tank could also collect better data on students who drop out, the reasons why they drop out, and the actual percentage of dropouts from any school. The think tank should also help identify what needs to be done to create effective schools and to find and disseminate effective resources.

There are no quick formulas nor easy answers for improving secondary urban high schools, but these four recommendations, along with the implementation of the four factors cited in this report can have a significant impact on improving school climate; assuring adequate time for learning and teaching; providing emotional; motivational and academic supports; and tailoring the curricula to meet the needs and aspirations of the students, community and faculty. Implementing these recommendations and the four factors will require strong, long-term, committed leadership from all parts of our community.

# **Endnotes, References and Appendix**

# Endnotes

1 - See the list of interviewees in Appendix.

2 - See the list of principals interviewed and visited schools in Appendix.

3 - Regardless of management structure, successful schools had identified these major components.

4 - The three University of Pennsylvania doctoral students are: Laura Hawkinson, Eric Hochberg, and Stephanie Levin. Their graduate paper is entitled “Characteristics of Successful Schools Project, Final Report,” September, 2009.

5 - Increasing school safety and improving instruction seem to make a significant difference in graduation rates. See Axelroth (2009) and Christman, et. al. (2009).

6 - Restorative practices is a specific program designed to build positive relationships through dialogue and conflict resolution. For further information, go to: <http://www.transformingconflict.org>

7 - Peer mediation programs provide training and support for students to help resolve conflict peacefully. For more information, go to: <http://esrnational.org/professional-services/high-school/prevention/peer-mediation-programs>.

8 - Positive behavior support programs provide approaches and strategies for changing the climate and culture of a school from negative to positive. For more information on this program, go to: <http://www.pbis.org>.

9 - For example, KIPP, Mastery Charter, and Harlem Village Academy all have developed strong, rule-based systems for establishing a positive climate in their schools.

10 - See Restorative Practices information in footnote 6.

11- For further information on classroom meetings see Edwards and Mullis (2003). See also Twenty Kinds of Classroom Meetings from Educators for Social Responsibility, at <http://www.ethicsed.org/consulting/meetingideas.htm>.

12 - For support of this perspective, see, for example, Christman, Brown, et. al. (2009).

13 - Reading Apprenticeship is a secondary school program designed to help struggling readers improve their skills and succeed in doing rigorous academic work. For more information, go to: <http://www.wested.org/cs/ra/print/docs/ra/home.htm>.

14 - “Distributed leadership” is a leadership approach that emphasizes leadership interactions between school leaders, other administrators, teachers, and the community at large. It focuses on helping school leaders “distribute” leadership and power to others so that they have the ability to initiate change and participate in the leadership process. For further information, see Spillane (2006).



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# Appendix: Interviewees and Schools Visited

## *Interviews and visits were conducted by:*

- University of Pennsylvania doctoral students: Laura Hawkinson, Eric Hochberg and Stephanie Levin
- Dennis Barnebey, Public Citizens for Children and Youth
- Norman Newberg, Educational Consultant
- Elliott Seif, Educational Consultant

## *Interviewees:*

- Jolley Bruce Christman, Founder and Senior Researcher, Research for Action
- Simon Hauger, Automotive Academy, West Philadelphia High School
- Ayesha Imani, Principal, Sankofa Freedom Academy Charter School
- Rachel King-Davis, Teacher, Parkway Northwest High School for Peace and Social Justice
- Alan Liebowitz, Former Principal, George Washington High School
- Torch Lytle, Professor of Education, University of Pennsylvania
- Lisa Nutter, President and CEO, Philadelphia Academies Inc.
- John Puckett, Professor and Chair, Policy, Measurement, and Education, University of Pennsylvania
- Matthew Riggan, Consortium for Policy Research in Education
- Sheila Simmons, Education Director, Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY)
- Paul Socolar, Editor, Philadelphia Public School Notebook
- Josh Varon, Education Law Center

## *Principals and Faculty Interviewed and Schools Visited:*

- Saliyah Cruz, Principal, West Philadelphia High School
- Terry Dillon, Counselor, Northeast High School
- Sharif El-Fekki, Principal, Mastery Charter School, Shoemaker Campus
- Chris Johnson, Principal, Benjamin Franklin High School
- Mark Mannella, Founder and CEO, KIPP Philadelphia Charter School
- Shawna Wells, Managing Director of Development, KIPP Philadelphia Charter School
- Constance McAlister, Principal, Bartram School



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