Proposed Student Success Audit Tool

Discussion Draft

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There are now a number of exciting success stories in public education, almost all at the level of individual schools, or small groups of schools. These success stories raise an interesting question. Are there lessons to be learned? Principles to be identified? Approaches which, if repeated, would produce similar successes in any school that diligently applied them?

Or, to put it differently, is there a success diagnostic that can be gleaned from these stories? Can we derive a structured diagnostic framework - an audit tool, if you will - that will help us rate today's public school capabilities? That will suggest a qualitatively stronger way of organizing schools and educating students?

I think it is possible to do exactly this. In this paper, I offer a first cut, a rough draft. It will take many sets of eyes, many contributors, to make this document genuinely useful. For now, getting started is what counts.

In the pages that follow, I address the following:

0. A Preview of the Diagnostic

Success Capability Diagnostic – First Draft

Design Features	Present at my school?	Motivation & Culture	Learnable Lessons	Effective Teaching	Adequate Time	Early Interv'n
Strong success culture for students (KIPP, Granger)		✓				
Teacher-mentor for every student (Granger)		✓				
Teacher meetings with every caregiver (Granger)		✓				
Upperclass mentors for high school freshmen (ASHS)		✓				
Life skills coaching for poverty children (Comer)		✓				
Daily homerooms with teacher-mentors (Granger)		✓				
Discipline system based on privileges and privileges withheld (KIPP, ASHS)		✓				
Teachers coached in connecting constructively with misbehaving children (Comer)		✓				
Coursework that matches student ability level (UPCS)		✓	✓			
Lessons vetted for learnability (Engelmann)			✓			
Teaching to mastery (Engelmann)		✓	✓	✓		
Regular teacher observation and feedback (UPCS)			✓	✓		
Exciting instruction (e.g. KIPP's rap chants)			✓	✓		
Lessons given at student's ability level, not way above it (UPCS)			✓			
Daily writing practice in every class (UPCS)			✓	✓		
Teachers on call if students don't understand (KIPP)				✓		✓
Long enough school day and school week (KIPP)					✓	
Summer programs for added support (ASHS)					✓	
Study Halls used for struggling students (ASHS)					✓	✓
Fast feedback on students with low grades (ASHS)						✓
Structured support for every student who's fallen behind (ASHS)						✓

1. Core Assumptions

A new era requires a new paradigm. Today's public school mission is a new one – educate all children, not just the most able and the most prepared. Yesterday's high schools were created, originally, to educate the elite, with universal education confined to the primary grades. No one expected all students to stay in school through 12th grade. Schools were designed to educate those who were ready. In recent years, schools have also been asked to treat those with special needs, and a philosophy of staffing up with specialists has boosted budgets without adding classroom instruction. School district management revolves around the annual budget ritual – how much money can the district raise? And what sort of incremental adjustments to school staffing make the most sense, given the size of the annual budget? The incremental adjustment paradigm works, in a budget sense, but only in a budget sense. Too many 9th graders still can't reach a 2.0 grade point average. Too many students drop out before graduation. Today's mission isn't being fulfilled by yesterday's paradigm.

Large numbers → Few surprises. In a school system that educates about 6000 children per grade, there should be very few surprises. Almost every kind of possible success will be seen repeatedly. Almost every kind of possible failure will be seen repeatedly. Whatever it takes to avert failure and cause success in the case of any individual child will be applicable to quite a number of other children. Whatever the arts of "causing success" may be, in principle they are mostly knowable and mostly repeatable. That doesn't mean they're easy to figure out, nor does it mean they are easy to apply, but it does mean that each lesson learned will be applicable to large numbers of children. It also means that almost every child who experiences difficulty will do so for reasons that have been seen any number of times before.

School principals and district planners are responsible for creating a success paradigm. If you wanted to build a tire able to last for 60,000 miles, you'd have to be deeply knowledgeable about rubber and its properties. If you wanted to send a spaceship to the moon and back, you'd have to be very very smart about the physics of space flight. If you want to educate 6,000 children a year, you need to be very very smart about why children succeed, when they do, and about why children don't succeed, when they don't. And you'd have to be very smart about creating conditions that prevent failure and promote success, for every type of child who shows up at the schoolhouse door. That's the core responsibility of principals and district planners – being very very smart about why children succeed, and knowing how to promote student success, for 6,000 children a year, at every grade level.

Public education is like a giant science project. In the elementary grades, our schools introduce children to the concepts of framing hypotheses, testing them by conducting experiments and gathering data, and using the results to evaluate their validity. Would that we were as systematic in the way we run our schools and our school districts. Every

class period that a teacher conducts represents the test of a hypothesis about how children learn, whether the hypothesis is articulated or not, whether the results are measured or not, whether the outcomes are evaluated or not. 6 class periods a day, time 180 days, times 13 years from Kindergarten through Senior Year, represents 14,040 lessons for each student, from the beginning of their public school experience to the end. Each – today – an unarticulated hypothesis, from which not nearly enough is learned. A school system that wanted to be absolutely excellent in helping children learn would view this flow of 14,000 lessons as a magnificent source of opportunity for getting smarter, smarter, and smarter about what it takes to make sure every student learns. Which variables are critical? Which variables aren't? In today's schools, we may not know which variables are the most important, but a systematic approach to documenting hypotheses and results would – in time – make it possible to identify the most important variables with increasing confidence.

2. An Overview of Success Principles

Since systemwide success is measured in a school system's ability to educate every child, and graduate almost all children, understanding the child is the starting point. Children learn . . . when? For a school system to do its job properly, this is ***the*** strategic question.

Here's the model I offer.

Children learn when . . .
. . . when they're motivated to learn, and . . .
. . . when they're presented with a learnable curriculum, and . . .
. . . when their teachers know how to reach each child, and . . .
. . . when the children spend enough time on their work to succeed, and . . .
. . . when the school intervenes quickly with every child who's slipping, and . . .
. . . (what else?) . . .

Children don't learn if . . .
. . . if they're not motivated to learn, or . . .
. . . if the lessons they're given aren't very learnable, or . . .
. . . if the teacher isn't good at reaching each child, or . . .
. . . if the class periods and the school days are too short to get the work done, or . . .
. . . if the school lets children slip and slip and slip without acting to give help, or . . .
. . . (what else?)

Note the difference in these two formulations.

When A *and* B *and* C *and* D *and* E hold for a child, the child will learn. When A *or* B *or* C *or* D *or* E doesn't hold, the child may not learn.

For all children to learn, all the success conditions have to hold. For each child, in all his or her particularity.

If any of the success conditions doesn't hold, the probability of failure rises, and the percentage of students who'll fall behind rises.

The strategic challenge is daunting, but definable. Create schools in which *all* the success conditions will be present, for *every* student.

Student motivation – gotta get it right for all the kids.
Learnable curriculum, learnable lessons – have to meet that standard, for every child.
Teachers who know how to teach each child in the classroom – have to meet that standard too.
Time – enough time to "learn to mastery" – for every child – all the time.
Intervention – every student who slips gets identified, and gets whatever help needed to get back on track.

Doing this properly is the central mission of every school and every school district. In AACPS terms: "You want all 6,000 kids, in each grade, to be a full grade smarter at the end of the year than they were at the beginning? You need to make sure that those success factors click in, not just for 4,000 kids, not just for 5,000 kids, but for all 6,000. In each and every grade."

One can think of this as a "tipping point" philosophy. Different children have different tipping points. As a broad generalization, middle class children get motivated by education more easily than children of poverty. Children of poverty often (not always!) have less learning readiness than middle class children. So it takes a richer mix of success ingredients – eight, ten, twelve success ingredients all in the same school. When enough success ingredients are built into a school program, even children of poverty succeed. And succeed at a much higher rate than before. There's a success ingredient tipping point. Schools that aren't successful in educating children of poverty fail because they haven't built in a full range of success factors.

One can also think of this as an analytic framework that a district can use to get smarter and smarter about assuring student success. Let's look at failure at any point along the way. Student failure has reasons. A school system that wants to be excellent at the business of assuring student learning has to know, for each student who fails, what went wrong in the way the school was organized that contributed to that failure.

Every student who fails should lead to a data point being added to a database that correlates the student's failure with a systemic failure to provide that student with strong

enough success conditions. In other words, the central data collection question is: "What did we fail to provide that contributed to this student flunking? Or dropping out?"

Today's school system doesn't code dropouts this way. Its coding system for dropouts has zero value analytically.

If tomorrow's school system is to be significantly more competent than today's, as it must, this is one practice that has to change. The coding system for dropouts has to explain, for every single dropout, where the school system failed to have a strong enough success system in place for each student. Was it a motivation shortfall? Were the lessons not learnable? Was the teaching not competent? Did the child slip behind without ever being rescued? It might have been one factor; it might have been all of them. Every factor that contributed needs to be identified. Not one student should drop out without the system making a strong effort to know exactly what systemic weakness was responsible for that child dropping out.

Conversely, the school system also needs to get smarter and smarter and smarter about its success factors. This year maybe it knows four good ways to keep students motivated. Next year it should know five. And the year after that it should know six. And so on. If it understands itself as being in the student learning business, and if it has a complete enough picture of the success factors that assure student learning, it still needs to get as smart as it can about how to maintain and improve on its existing success.

Fundamentally, this is the same scientific approach that is taught in Fourth Grade science projects. There's a hypothesis: When all the following conditions hold, students learn; when any of the following conditions are missing, some students don't learn. There's a testing procedure. Schools enroll students and give them a series of activities. As time goes on, students have opportunities to demonstrate their competence. These tests tell us whether student learning is growing at the expected rate, or not growing. Then we diagnose those cases where it's not growing, to see if the reasons it isn't growing correspond with our hypothesis or not. We also diagnose the cases where it is growing, to see if they too correspond with the success hypothesis. Then we evaluate the hypothesis, improve it where called for, and adjust the learning activities in the school accordingly.

Today's success hypothesis – to the extent that it is articulated as such – often takes the form of a prayer. "If we spend more money on X, or maybe Y, or maybe Z, we'll get better test scores." A school system can't learn much about its central business mission if its hypothesis formulation and testing process is this sloppy.

Several years ago, I heard Rich Fairbank speak. Rich is the CEO of Capitol One, a highly successful credit card company. Rich built Capitol One from the ground up as an information intensive company. Its software captures every possible piece of information

about customers, so that Capitol One can be as smart as possible about how to market its services successfully. In his talk, Rich said – This year we will conduct about forty thousand market experiments, testing different hypotheses. And we'll learn everything we can from those tests. Next year, we'll test about sixty thousand marketing hypotheses."

This is an awesome commitment to wringing insight from data. Any school district that wants to make sure every student learns will have to make a similar commitment to hypothesis formulation, testing, and evaluation.

How This Ties to Budget and Strategy

The starting point – as described above – is student learning. Public schools are in the student learning business, and it's their job to succeed with every student. Public schools are not directly in the Adequate Yearly Progress business, or the "filling buildings with staff" business, or the Goals and Indicators business. They're in the student learning business, and to succeed in that business, they have to know why students learn, when they do, why they don't learn, when they don't, and how to organize a school's resources to make sure that every student gets on a learning path and stays on the path.

So – as described above – everything starts with a deep understanding of what it takes to make sure students learn.

That understanding then has to be translated into programmatic terms. What sorts of programmatic themes must classroom teachers emphasize? Principals? District staff? These become the action essentials that test the core hypotheses.

Next, programmatic themes have to be translated into staffing essentials and budget essentials. How many people? How many dollars? What's the budget that assures student learning? A budget has to be built to acquire those resources.

And budget allocations then reflect core priorities. The "have to haves" are the resources that assure student learning. The "nice to haves" build a support framework around that, and extend the capabilities of the system into optional areas. If there's not enough money to cover everything, and there never is, then the school system's core priorities must cover "have to haves" more fully than the "nice to haves."

Then, once the spending allocations have been worked out, given the success factors, the program themes, and the available funds, classroom by classroom implementation takes place. School by school implementation takes place. Student by student support steps

are put in place. Results are captured, evaluated, factored into the school system's core knowledge base about how to make sure every child learns, about how to avoid the system mistakes that will lead to some children not learning.

So what does strategy consist of? It starts by emphasizing deep knowledge of how to assure learning success for every student. It translates that deep knowledge into programs. Then it translates those programs into budget. It priorities spending claims and allocates available budget resources. Then, in schools, teachers and principals and the entire staff set about applying those principles in every aspect of the life of the school. It all coheres as a hypothesis about how to succeed, with every child. And – as the hypothesis is tested – results are tracked, so that the school and the district can learn both from each success and each failure.

3. Success Stories

KIPP: The Knowledge is Power Program

KIPP, the Knowledge Is Power Program, was founded in the 1990s in Houston, Texas, by Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, a pair of twenty-somethings who'd been fifth grade teachers. With the help of an older teacher from whom they'd learned a thousand tricks about managing and motivating students, they'd become pretty decent teachers. As their students moved on to middle school, they'd talk to Mike and Dave about the way their schooling was just falling apart.

Feinberg and Levin decided to invent their own middle school – a school they'd be proud of, a school that'd get the job done for the kids they were teaching. They pulled an all-nighter, drafted a plan for a new middle school, then set about finding a way to do it. In time, school authorities in Houston agreed to provide them with classroom space if they could enroll at least fifty children. They visited parents in their homes, talked to them about their plans, and signed up enough to get started.

The KIPP Academy was a public charter school. Feinberg and Levin were provided classroom space and per-student funding by the public school system. In its first year, KIPP was 5th grade only. Year by year, they added new grades, till they'd rounded out their school as a 5th to 8th grade school. (At some point in this narrative, Dave Levin moved back to the Bronx, and set up a second KIPP school.)

By the late 90's, it was clear they knew what they were doing. Though their students were drawn from poverty homes and neighborhoods, they'd done so well at KIPP they were offered one scholarship after another by first-rate prep schools. CBS took notice, and Mike Wallace featured KIPP on Sixty Minutes. The owners of The Gap clothing chain saw the Sixty Minutes segment, and decided to put several million dollars into a foundation to replicate KIPP in cities all over the US.

What does KIPP do that makes it special? Many things, all at once.

There's a learning contract, for each child, each parent, each teacher. Each child signs a contract promising to work hard. Each teacher signs a contract promising to be available for questions whenever a child is confused, even if that means an 11 PM phone call now and then. Each parent signs a contract promising to review the child's work, on a nightly basis, and make sure the child stays on track.

As mentioned, each teacher is available, 24/7. If a child's at home, struggling with homework, and confused about a particular point, it perfectly okay for the child to call the teacher and ask for help.

Each child learns – the very first day – when he or she will start college. "KIPPsters, you're the Class of 2015," new fifth graders will be told. "Today, you're a KIPPster. In 2015, just eight years from now, you'll be starting college." It's drilled into each child, every day, over and over. "You're a future college student. Prepare yourself!"

Each classroom is given a name, and it's named for the college the teacher attended.

KIPPsters spend a lot more time in school than the average public school student. The school day is eight or nine hours long, not six, and classes often meet on Saturday morning.

The KIPP lessons are enriched with lots of excitement. How to make sure kids know their multiplication tables? KIPP teaches children a rap chant.

KIPP adds excitement to the program with frequent field trips and other fun activities, and then uses this as part of its discipline and motivation program. KIPP students who misbehave, who break the rules, lose the right to take part in the next field trip. In the world of carrots and sticks, KIPP prefers the carrot, and its discipline takes the form of "carrot deprivation," if you will.

What lessons does KIPP have to offer?

KIPP creates a positive culture for its kids. "You are going to college." Working hard. Being nice. There's a value system that the school celebrates, actively, frequently, enthusiastically. Being part of KIPP isn't a routine matter, it's exciting.

KIPP's discipline system isn't about telling kids they're bad. It's about telling them they've let their classmates down, and they need to work harder, so they can get back in the flow, and be part of the success. Even when discipline is being applied, it's done affirmatively.

KIPP works hard to make its lessons fun, exciting, learnable.

The teachers build close relationships with their kids. The day is longer, they spend more time with them, they create a sense of fun, and they're there for them, as people, any hour of the day or night. Which means they have an easier time getting the material across to the kids. And they know the kids well enough to know when they need to adjust instruction to make the lesson more understandable.

KIPP isn't afraid to keep kids in school for longer hours. Whatever it takes, to make sure the kids learn.

This doubles back on the culture. It creates a much deeper work ethic. Whatever it takes to learn, we do it. Kids develop a culture of being workers.

The KIPP environment is holistic. It didn't arise out of a modest adjustment to an existing program; it was put together with as many success ingredients as Feinberg and Levin could imagine.

KIPP expresses a "tipping point" strategy, or maybe it should be called a "critical mass" strategy. It takes more success ingredients for a school to get poverty children motivated and learning. Eight success ingredients? Ten? Twelve? Fifteen? Feinberg and Levin packed their design, their KIPP paradigm, with as many success ingredients as they could imagine, because they knew the old paradigm just didn't have enough juice. Enrich a kid enough, you get him to his motivational tipping point, and he becomes a self-sustaining learner. If you don't enrich him enough, he never breaks away from the old mold.

UPCS: The University Park Campus School

UPCS is a small junior-senior high school in Worcester, Massachusetts. Its total enrollment is a little over 200; seventy percent of its students are from poverty families; all its 10th graders pass the Massachusetts state tests in English and Math. (Only 7 or 8 other high schools in the state reach an "all students pass" success level.)

Though it operates within the public school system, UPCS is analogous to a charter school. It was created as the result of an initiative in which Clark University in Worcester asked the public school system to take action to stabilize the neighborhood near the campus. Deteriorating social conditions were making it harder for Clark to attract applicants.

As with KIPP, the school went into operation one grade at a time, first 7th grade, then 7 and 8, adding one grade a year till it was full.

Entering students read at a 5th grade level or below. The first year, seventh grade, is essentially a remedial reading year. The second year, eighth grade, devotes half its time to remedial math. The push is to have students ready for high school work by the time they reach ninth grade.

UPCS insists on writing as a key to learning. Every student writes in every class, every day. They call it "low stakes writing." The principal (and former reading instructor), June Eressy, described one situation in which she co-taught math with a new math teacher, in order to show the new teacher how to integrate writing instruction into the teaching of math.

The idea is – I take it – that Eressy thinks of the act of writing as the best way to exercise the thinking muscles in the brain. The more writing a student does, the more exercise in thinking the student gets.

- A large part of targeted instruction is knowing what books to recommend. Principal Eressy is a big fan of teenage literature. The district supplies approved anthologies, she notes, but they don't use them. They recommend trade books to the kids, from authors they think the kids will enjoy. If they pick the right book, the kid enjoys it, the kid reads it, the kid grows. It drives her nuts that her own son is being pushed through Silas Marner (he's not allowed to attend his mom's school) which he doesn't enjoy.

- They also emphasize finishing a book once you start it. That begins with the Summer Academy, a 3 – week orientation class for entering 7th graders. Every new 7th grader gets a book to read, and it's one they'll be able to finish during the Summer Academy. (regardless of how low their reading level may be when they start)

UPCS emphasizes teacher observation. First the teacher to be observed describes her lesson plan to those who will be the observers. Then the teacher teaches the class, the observers observe. Finally, they meet to give feedback, where the observers talk about strengths and weaknesses and, more importantly, talk about what sort of particular help they think each student needs.

Observation is informal as well. As it's a small school, in an old building, there's no extra space for separate teacher offices. When teachers have work periods of their own, they sit in the back of other teachers' classrooms, just to have a place to work. This adds to the observation that takes place.

Wednesday mornings are used for staff meetings. That's the morning when itinerant teachers arrive at the school to provide art and music and choir and PE classes to the students, freeing up the regular teachers for shared staff meetings. In those meetings, teachers compare notes on each of their students and develop ideas for how to help any student who may be having difficulties.

The connection with Clark brings two major benefits to the school. Clark promises any graduate of UPCS a free four years at Clark, provided the graduate has lived in the local neighborhood for at least five years. In the meantime, once students reach 9th grade, they're eligible to take classes at Clark as well as classes at UPCS.

What lessons does UPCS have to offer?

Think about the theme I call "learnable curriculum." If a student entering UPCS reads at a 4th grade level, would it make sense to place that student into a standard 7th grade English class? Lessons that are three grades ahead of the student's current capabilities wouldn't be learnable, would they? Respecting the reality of where a student is, today, would seem to be the first step in making sure a student plugs into the curriculum at a level where real learning can actually take place.

The probability that daily classroom teaching will be effective goes up sharply when teachers are regularly observed and get regular feedback. This is not a new point – there has been a fair amount of conversation in the education press about this theme already. But that doesn't mean school administrators take the trouble to make it happen. I'm told that Annapolis High expects to have two mentor teachers next year. How many classrooms can two mentor teachers serve? The amount of constructive feedback likely with two mentors serving a faculty of a hundred will, at best, be a tiny fraction of the feedback UPCS teachers benefit from.

Think about student culture. UPCS doesn't make a point of it, in the way KIPP does, but a culture of readying all students for college, regardless of the poverty level they start from, has to be one of the strong points in the UPCS program.

Think about the tipping point theme. Like KIPP, University Park Campus School is packed with success factors. It's the opposite of the "incremental adjustment" model that's so typical.

DI: Siegfried Engelmann, Direct Instruction

Siegfried Engelmann entered the world of education through the side door, and has never been part of the mainstream. In his early twenties, he spent a bit of time in the world of marketing and market research, and was soon asked to figure out what sort of advertising works best with younger children.

It didn't take him long, once he'd developed a relationship with university researchers in Illinois, to realize that he was much more interested in learning issues among young children than he was in advertising. Engelmann details his story in a new book, not yet published, but intermittently available in pdf format online.

The essence of the story is this. Quite early in his work with young children, Engelmann realized that kids are both literal and associative. Give an instruction to a child, and the child will use his powers of association to assign a meaning to the instruction. If the child finds a meaning for the instruction you didn't realize it had, the child will interpret the instruction in ways that you, the teacher, hadn't intended.

If a child is to learn, effectively, Engelmann realized, the teacher must be sure that the instruction given to the child has one and only one meaning.

This drew Engelmann into another insight – the only way to be sure your instructions are learnable is to test them, in real time, with children, and to adapt, and adapt, and adapt, until you can be confident that every child will learn as you want him to learn.

Engelmann's approach is to teach every child to mastery. More able children reach mastery sooner. Less able children take longer. But every child is capable of reaching mastery, if the instruction has been rigorously scrubbed for learnability. And once children achieve mastery, then the next level of learning is much easier for them to acquire.

As the fruit of his efforts, Engelmann created a reading and math instruction program for elementary schools that he called Direct Instruction. It has not been popular with mainstream education – this is more or less the central theme of his unpublished book – but it has been rated as one of the few Comprehensive School Reform Models that actually makes a lasting difference.

What is the lesson from Engelmann? The test of good instruction is not whether it is done according to rituals and principles grownups approve of; the test of good instruction is whether children learn from it. The more you vet your material for learnability, the more useful it's likely to be for the children to whom it is given.

Another lesson is that teaching every child to mastery reduces the amount of waste activity considerably. Pushing children of varying learning speeds through a one-size-fits-all teaching approach almost inevitably results in some children being moved into the next module before they've acquired mastery in the last. Repeat this over and over, children who don't have mastery will grow more and more frustrated. Conversely, with Engelmann's approach, bringing every child to mastery creates a basis for further success, not just with some of the school system's children, but with all the school system's children.

Are "learnability" and "teaching to mastery" the lessons by which textbook companies operate? As we all know, these notions have little to do with the logic by which textbooks are created. Textbooks are created to please the textbook adoption powers-that-be in Florida, Texas, and California, where statewide textbook adoption is the rule. Learnability and learning to mastery don't matter to textbook publishers if they don't matter to California, Texas, and Florida buyers.

I served for a brief time as a community member on Dr. Jim Foran's Curriculum Committee, within AACPS. Teachers poured a great deal of work into assembling detailed curricula, and the committee was a place where they could earn a little applause

for all the work they had done. Did anyone ever raise the issue of learnability? I cannot recall a single instance where anyone inquired as to the odds that children in the county school system would actually be sure to learn, effectively, from the material the curriculum writers had pulled together. The essence of the process, as I recall, focused on whether the curriculum covered topics of interest to the grownups.

Learnability is not something that can be pre-determined in the abstract. Learnability is a pragmatic concept. If kids "get it," it's learnable. If they don't, it may not be. The issue for a school district is whether it has a meaningful way of rating the learnability of its instructional resources – its overall curriculum, its individual grade-level courses, its weekly lesson plans, its instructional support materials, even it point-by-point, moment by moment learning steps. A school system that isn't set up to evaluate learnability is at the mercy of the political fashions in Texas and California and Florida.

(I am indebted to Tom Neumark, one of the participants in the AACAC listserv, for bringing the work of Siegfried Engelmann to AACAC's attention.)

GHS: Richard Esparza, Granger High School

For the past eight years or so, Richard Esparza has been principal of Granger High School, outside Seattle. Esparza, like June Eressy at UPCS, is driven by a need to figure out what it takes to make high schools click when they serve low income kids. One of his favorite devices – a box full of phony, black and white twenty dollar bills, four hundred thousand dollars worth. "You're thinking about dropping out?" he'll challenge a student. "Sink your hands into this. Four hundred thousand dollars. That's what you'll lose, over a working lifetime, by dropping out of school!"

But Esparza's main concern is the futility of relying on guidance counselors as the main way for students and their parents to connect with his school. Let's imagine we have one guidance counselor for 400 students – he'll challenge his audience. Let's imagine you're a student with a problem. If you can't get your problem solved, how long is it going to take you to connect with your guidance counselor?

Esparza has divided his entire student body into groups of eighteen to twenty kids. Every licensed teacher in the school, Esparza included, is responsible for one of those groups. As I understand it, twenty minutes a day is set aside for teachers and their students to get together, Monday through Thursday.

If you're an incoming freshman, you'll be assigned a teacher who'll be your permanent adviser, for the next four years. You'll get to know your adviser pretty darn well.

Esparza also expects each teacher to meet with the parents/caregivers of each of their students. One hundred percent success rate. No excuses. He checks carefully, and holds everyone to it.

Not one time a year. Five times a year. Each teacher meets daily with his/her group of twenty kids. And meets five times a year with each child and the child's caregiver.

Isn't that an amazing amount of interaction between a parent and a teacher at a high school?

In elementary school, parents know who the "go to" person is. It's the child's classroom teacher. What happens in middle school? In high school? The "go to" person disappear. Is it a guidance counselor? Someone who deals with two, three, maybe four hundred students? Of what value is that?

At Granger High School, parent participation rates have risen from the low single digits into the high double digits. Giving each child a teacher who's the child's champion, giving each parent a single adult at the school they can connect with, makes a huge difference. Granger High School serves a mostly Hispanic, mostly poverty area. It had been a center of high teen crime rates. Esparza has reduced this dynamic, and done a lot to stabilize and improve what had been a very difficult and troubled high school.

What lessons can we learn from Richard Esparza and Granger High School?

Esparza's initiative addresses student culture – not in quite the same way KIPP addresses student culture – but also in a very effective way. Give students a way of feeling that there's an adult who's on their side. Give their parents/caregivers a way of feeling that there's someone in the school who's on their side. It makes a big difference in a student's commitment to the school.

Esparza has a culture strategy. He was up against a culture of crime, a culture of indifference, and with a few simple steps he made a huge difference.

Comer: Dr. James Comer, The Comer Program

Dr. James Comer is not that tall. He's almost elderly. He's very sweet. He's very smart. He's black. He's a professor emeritus at Yale. He's a retired pediatric psychiatrist affiliated with the Yale-New Haven Hospital. (Where my wife was born, come to think of it.)

When he was a child, he tells his audience, he had two friends who were just as clever as he was. But they never made anything of their lives. And he became quite successful. Why is that, he asks his audiences.

He credits his mother. Though she was a laborer, who never went past the second grade, she possessed an enormous fund of life skills. From very early, his mother and his father tutored their children well. They ate together at the dinner table quite regularly. Were there arguments? Yes. Were the kids allowed to fly off the handle if they were losing an argument? No. They were required to respond with reason and facts and courtesy. They were required to learn self-control, and maturity.

What about his friends? They didn't learn the same skills. They didn't learn the same self-control, the same ability to persist in a discussion until they could win the day through courtesy and reason.

Comer began working with public schools many years ago, and as he did, he developed a program that came to be known as the Comer Program. It isn't a program that emphasizes higher test scores; it's program that emphasizes life skills for children.

Think of a teacher in a classroom, Comer says. One day Johnny throws a fit. He screams, he curses, he bangs the desks.

What's the normal response? Oh, dear, Johnny's breaking the rules, time for a write-up, a referral to the principal's office.

What happens if the teacher has been trained to develop the child's life skills? "What's the matter, Johnny?" the teacher asks, supportively, in the face of quite a bit of rage. Well, it turns out that Johnny's dad is in prison. And he was supposed to be home for Christmas. But something went wrong. And Johnny's just learned his dad won't be home for Christmas after all. And he is seriously bent out of shape by disappointment.

As the teacher learns this, she counsels Johnny. "Getting angry the way you did isn't going to fix the problem. But I tell you what," she says. "How about if you write a letter to your dad? And tell him how much you love him, and how much you miss him, and how you hope you'll be able to see him soon." "And I'll help you write the letter."

Instead of the teacher turning herself into just another angry adult the boy can't trust, she becomes one of his supporters and champions.

According to Comer, a national study of 30 different comprehensive school reform programs found only three that have made a lasting difference for the students who've been through them – his program, Engelmann's program, and one other.

What lessons can be learned from Comer's approach?

What I know about Comer's program isn't quite as clearcut as what I think I know of the others, so please allow me to be a bit more tentative.

Comer works on three themes at the same time, as I see it. He works on curriculum, in the broad sense. What is it that children need to learn to be effective? When he's working with children of poverty, he's especially interested in helping the children learn the same kind of mature life skills that middle class children learn as a matter of course. He's also working with teachers in the area that I would think of as "faculty culture." How do teachers, culturally, relate to the children they're working with? It isn't always natural for children to give poverty children the kind of nurturing they need; Comer is intent on developing a faculty culture that helps every teacher approach children effectively. And he works at the level of "student culture." What is it that students believe about themselves and tell their peers about what's important?

It is difficult to imagine schools succeeding with children of poverty if they ignore the sort of personal development work that Comer emphasizes. Comer's approach, like KIPP's, addresses the issue of "student culture," and unlike KIPP, Comer isn't working with kids whose parents have opted in. He's working with every child that walks through the door, no matter how low the child's initial interest in school might be.

If getting student culture right is one of the keys to success, in the elementary years, then Comer's program is an important source of wisdom about the road that schools must travel when they're determined to "get it right on student culture."

ASHS: Adlai Stevenson High School, "Whatever It Takes"

In the book *Whatever It Takes*, co-authored by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Gayle Karhanek, we learn how Adlai Stevenson High School went from a time when 30% of its freshmen received D's and F's to a time when only 5% of its freshman receive D's and F's.

The authors focus on early warning, systematic intervention, and on a series of logistical support adjustments.

Adlai Stevenson High, a school with 4000 students, used to have nine week marking periods. A student might be making D's in all his courses, and his mom and dad wouldn't learn of it till the end of the marking period. By then, with a quarter of the year gone, it's too late for full recovery, and parent frustration was high.

School leaders (I gather Richard DuFour was principal for part of the period described in the book) decided this wasn't an effective way to operate. They replaced nine-week marking periods with six week marking periods (6 a year), and a three week interim report in the middle of each marking period. A student making D's or F's might escape parental attention for three weeks, but the interim report would alert everyone to the problem at a much earlier point.

The high school adopted a series of intervention strategies – voluntary at the outset, to an increasingly intense set of mandatory activities for any student who's not making passing grades. Optional tutoring, guided study hall (in study halls of 10 students only), and mentoring. Teachers pass along the daily assignments to the study hall leaders and the mentors, so that the students can be kept on task.

This is the heart of a network of strategies aimed at making sure every student is up to speed from the outset. High school counselors meet with next year's incoming freshman shortly after the second half of the 8th grade has begun. 8th grade teachers systematically identify the learning strengths and weaknesses of every 8th grader so the high school can begin work over the summer with those students in greatest need of early help. Summer athletic programs were coordinated with summer school classes so that no student in need of summer school would be forced to choose between sports and studies. Upperclassmen volunteer to serve as freshman mentors, another way to help new students make the transition into high school and feel connected with their new school. A complete list of extracurricular activities is provided to new students, and every new student is encouraged to get involved in at least one extracurricular activity. (Being involved correlates well with being connected and staying motivated.)

The school reorganized some of its activities to support the new emphasis on intense faculty support for students who were struggling academically. There'd been a 7-period day for some time, with one study hall period for each student, with students gathered in classrooms in groups of 25, with one teacher in attendance. As part of the reorganization, upperclassmen were freed from attending study hall, the remaining study halls were moved to venues of 100 students, and scores of teachers were thus freed up to serve as advisors and tutors for the children who needed extra help. Upperclassmen were also recruited to serve as mentors, and this became a very popular activity for upperclassmen.

Discipline shifted from a "send misbehaving students home" approach to a "withhold privileges" approach, but first, a system of privileges had to be created. Freshmen had no privileges. Their lunch period was 25 minutes, and they weren't allowed to leave campus during the day. If they behaved well, as sophomores they were entitled to 50 minute lunch periods. As juniors, if they continued to behave, they'd earn one free period as well as a 50 minute lunch. And as seniors, if good behavior continued, they were entitled to drive to school and park on campus, and also to schedule their free period at the beginning or the end of the day. Students who violated rules would lose privileges; to get

their privileges back, they'd have to earn them back, with good behavior and good academic performance.

What lessons can be learned from the Adlai Stevenson story?

Student learning is at the center of the enterprise. The school knows very quickly who isn't learning, and it's organized to respond.

The school uses a full court press to make sure every student who's slipping gets pulled into a support relationship. And the support is built into the school day – instead of being in a large and undirected study hall, with students who are doing well, the student who's struggling is in a much smaller more intense and directly guided study hall, or even in a mentoring relationship.

Becoming more effective wasn't a matter of hiring new resources, it was a matter of reorganizing existing resources, and also of tapping into the talents of the upperclassmen who themselves are often capable of providing effective tutoring.

A culture of involvement is a strong theme in the Stevenson story. Meet the counselors while you're still in 8th grade. Find an extracurricular activity to belong to. Get connected with a freshman mentor.

The use of incentive based discipline system is another part of the culture story, as it is with KIPP. Creating a culture of kids who want to do well is easier when the incentives that discourage misbehavior are stronger. For many students, fear of losing privileges is a more effective motivator than fear of being sent home.

4. A Success Capability Diagnostic

The discussion above deals with six different examples. None of the examples, by itself, explicitly exemplifies all the success conditions mentioned in Section 2. Cumulatively, though, these success stories exemplify all of those success principles – motivated students, learnable curriculum and daily lessons, effective teaching, adequate time, early intervention.

Ask yourself if it's safe to ignore any of these principles. Motivated students? Learnable curriculum, learnable lessons? Effective teaching? Adequate time? Early intervention?

From these lessons, and from other success stories that we might know about, it should be possible to assemble a pretty decent "Success Capability Diagnostic" – a checklist of what's present and what's absent in any classroom, any school, any school district.

The following table represents a "first cut" at such a diagnostic. At the outset, it will probably be somewhat incomplete. As this paper circulates among experienced educators, I'm sure this diagnostic will only get better. Each of us has something to contribute, each of us can learn from many others. Working together, we're stronger than we are working separately.

Success Capability Diagnostic – First Draft

Design Features	**Present at my school?**	**Student Motivation & Culture**	**Learnable Lessons**	**Effective Teaching**	**Adequate Time**	**Early Interv'n**
Strong success culture for students (KIPP, Granger)		✓				
Teacher-mentor for every student (Granger)		✓				
Teacher meetings with every caregiver (Granger)		✓				
Upperclass mentors for high school freshmen (ASHS)		✓				
Life skills coaching for poverty children (Comer)		✓				
Daily homerooms with teacher-mentors (Granger)		✓				
Discipline system based on privileges and privileges withheld (KIPP, ASHS)		✓				
Teachers coached in connecting constructively with misbehaving children (Comer)		✓				
Coursework that matches student ability level (UPCS)		✓	✓			
Lessons vetted for learnability (Engelmann)			✓			
Teaching to mastery (Engelmann)		✓	✓	✓		
Regular teacher observation and feedback (UPCS)			✓	✓		
Exciting instruction (e.g. KIPP's rap chants)			✓	✓		
Lessons given at student's ability level, not way above it (UPCS)			✓			
Daily writing practice in every class (UPCS)			✓	✓		
Teachers on call if students don't understand (KIPP)				✓		✓
Long enough school day and school week (KIPP)					✓	
Summer programs for added support (ASHS)					✓	
Study Halls used for struggling students (ASHS)					✓	✓

Fast feedback on students with low grades (ASHS)						✓
Structured support for every student who's fallen behind (ASHS)						✓

This is a tool that anyone can use – parents, CAC members, teachers, principals, district leaders.

Which of these features are present in your school? Which are not present? Check off the ones you have. Add the ones you have that aren't on this list. Then see which columns they apply to, which success factors. Do you have all the bases covered?

Student Culture and Student Motivation. Does your school have a strong culture strategy for students? If it doesn't, it's at the mercy of the negative peer cultures that students soak up before they walk in the door. A school without a strong culture strategy is sure to see too many of its students lose motivation and fail, somewhere along the way.

Learnable Lessons, Learnable Curriculum. Can your school guarantee that all its lessons are learnable lessons? Are they pitched at students at a level they're ready for? Are students taught to mastery, before they move on?

Effective Teaching. Can your school assure effective teaching, in every classroom? Is every teacher regularly observed? Is there a regular process for teachers being given feedback on how well they reach each one of the students in their care?

Time to Learn to Mastery. Does your school provide enough time to make sure each student learns successfully?

Immediate Intervention. Does your school identify every struggling student immediately? And respond effectively with appropriate intervention?

If the answer to each of these five major themes is – Yes, we do that well – then the school being assessed is most likely an example for others to learn from.

If the answer to any of these themes is – No, we really don't have that under control – then the school (or school system) being assessed almost surely loses a larger percentage of children than it should.

Conclusion

This is not an exhaustive approach, but perhaps being exhaustive isn't the central point.

The core issue is that students succeed in much higher percentages when schools have all these factors under control – student culture and motivation, learnable lessons and curriculum, effective teaching, sufficient time, swift intervention for struggling learners.

And if that's the central business of a school district – assuring every child who walks through the schoolhouse door a program that will turn that child into a successful student – then it behooves each of us to work together to figure out the best possible way to deliver on that mission.

This paper is meant to be a modest contribution to the cause. I welcome feedback, so that this paper can steadily be improved. And so that the wider conversation about success factors can steadily be enriched.

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