



The AUSL Way

Moving from “Good” to “Truly Excellent”

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This article is part of a Bridgespan Group research project that focuses on a new wave of district-led “innovation zones” that holds promise to overcome the challenges of turning around failing schools and deliver significant improvements in student outcomes. This new wave provides a subset of district schools with control over staffing, curriculum, and budgeting. Such autonomy often is guaranteed by a contractual agreement and enabled by state law that can sustain the zone despite potential changes in district leadership. The schools are sometimes operated by a nonprofit that is held accountable to the school district for significant improvement in student outcomes.

Our research highlights the experiences of five school districts that are vanguards of this new wave of innovation zones—Chicago; Denver; Indianapolis; Memphis, TN; and Springfield, MA.

These innovation zones reveal certain design features that place a focus on improving teaching and learning over multiple years—the heart of any successful turnaround effort. Specifically promising innovation zones:

- Set ambitious goals
- Guarantee autonomy
- Improve teaching and learning
- Follow the students
- Are sustainable, scalable, and built to last

The article that follows looks in detail at one of the school districts profiled in the Bridgespan report [A New Wave of District Innovation Zones: A Promising Means of Increasing Rates of Economic Mobility](#).

In 2006, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) selected the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL)—known then as an innovative teacher-training program—to manage Sherman Elementary, one of the lowest-performing schools in the city. Ten years later, Sherman had improved to Level 1+, the district’s highest rating.

AUSL now manages a network of 31 neighborhood schools serving nearly 17,000 students, 92.5 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Under AUSL’s leadership, two-thirds of those schools have moved from the district’s lowest rating to Level 1 or Level 1+, with many approaching the national average for math and English language arts proficiency rates—a tribute to AUSL’s unique approach to transforming low-performing schools into schools of excellence.

The Road to Chicago’s Contract Schools

In 1987, US Secretary of Education William Bennett proclaimed Chicago’s public schools to be the worst in the nation.¹ The system has been on a mission ever since to move to the head of the class in urban school reform. That is no small task for the nation’s third-largest school district, with 652 schools, nearly 20,000 teachers, and some 400,000 students—80 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

A year after Bennett’s unsettling assessment of Chicago’s schools, the Illinois General Assembly passed a school reform act that authorized Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley to take control of the city’s schools. Soon thereafter, the district’s CEO embarked on a campaign to raise standards for student achievement and impose more accountability on schools. In 1995, the legislature upped the challenge by approving the Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act. The act empowered the mayor to appoint a five-member Reform Board of Trustees—replacing the Board of Education—that embarked upon comprehensive reform measures including opening new charter schools and closing underperforming schools.²

Early successes with charter schools set the stage in June of 2004 for Mayor Daley and the school district’s then-CEO Arne Duncan to announce the Renaissance 2010 initiative, a plan to create 100 high-quality schools by 2010.³ The initiative called for a combination of charter schools, independently operated contract schools, and CPS-run

1 “About,” Chicago Board of Education, <http://www.cpsboe.org/about>.

2 Stuart Luppescu, Elaine M. Allensworth, Paul Moore, Marisa de la Torre, James Murphy, with Sanja Jagesic, “Trends in Chicago’s Schools across Three Eras of Reform: Summary of Key Findings,” Consortium on Chicago School Research, September 2011.

3 “Renaissance 2010,” Chicago Public Schools, <http://www.cps.edu/PROGRAMS/DISTRICTINITIATIVES/Pages/Renaissance2010.aspx>.

small schools. Daley explains the bold move this way: “Despite our best efforts and the hard work of teachers, principals, parents and students, some schools have consistently underperformed. We must face the reality that—for schools that have consistently underperformed—it’s time to start over.” The *Chicago Tribune* called Renaissance 2010 the “most ambitious effort in a decade to remake the nation’s third-largest school system.”⁴

The district grounded the Renaissance 2010 initiative in a basic principle: “autonomy in exchange for accountability.” Renaissance schools would operate with control over staffing, curriculum, length of school day and year, and budgets, but would be held accountable by a standard set of metrics set out in a five-year performance agreement.

This initiative paved the way for CPS to test a new reform model: “contract turnaround schools” managed by independent nonprofits under a performance agreement with the district. Unlike charter schools, contract schools remained under the jurisdiction of the

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TIM KNOWLES, DIRECTOR OF CENTER OF URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO (FROM THE *CHICAGO TRIBUNE*)

school district. The model guaranteed the schools broad autonomy for the duration of their five-year contracts, and teachers would remain part of the Chicago Teachers Union.

Today, nonprofits interested in operating a contract school in Chicago apply to the Office of New Schools. Proposals are evaluated against five criteria: 1) high standards, rigorous curriculum, and powerful instruction; 2) systems

of support that meet student needs; 3) engaged and empowered families and community; 4) committed and effective teachers, leaders, and staff; and 5) sound fiscal, operational, and accountability systems. Once the Office of New Schools approves a nonprofit, it is eligible to take over a low-performing school, pending an open hearing and vote of approval by the Chicago Board of Education, restored by the legislature in 1999.⁵

The Academy for Urban School Leadership Pioneers Contract Schools

Nine years before the Renaissance 2010 initiative, venture capitalist Martin Koldyke funded the launch of the Academy for Urban School Leadership, a nonprofit with the goal of providing CPS with high-quality teachers prepared to succeed within the demanding conditions of failing urban schools. Donald Feinstein, a long-time CPS educator, joined as executive director—a position he continues to hold. In the fall of 2001, AUSL opened the school system’s first contract school, The Chicago Academy, which also was the system’s first school-based teacher preparation program. AUSL found space for it in a former junior college building constructed in 1934. The academy started with pre-kindergarten through fourth grade and grew to include four more grade levels in three years. (Chicago’s elementary schools include grades pre-K-8.)

For teachers in training, the academy offered the Chicago Teacher Residency, a full-time, year-long urban teacher training program loosely modeled after medical residencies for

4 Tracy Dell’Angela and Gary Washburn, “Daley set to remake troubled schools,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 25, 2004, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2004-06-25/news/0406250358_1_contract-schools-chicago-public-schools-schools-in-recent-years.

5 “About,” Chicago Board of Education.

doctors. Pairs of teacher residents work with a regular classroom teacher and also take courses to earn a master's degree and teacher certification. AUSL quickly won acclaim for its success in training highly effective teachers for the city's public schools but struggled to achieve large-scale impact. As Feinstein explains: "When we began to graduate teachers out of the program, our hypothesis was that we'd place two to three well-prepared teachers in low-performing schools, and that would be a catalyst for change. That turned out not to be the case."⁶

In 2006, after graduating almost 200 teachers from its residency program, AUSL made a significant shift and expanded its operations into managing turnaround schools. At the school system's request, AUSL signed a contract to manage Sherman Elementary, one of the lowest-performing schools in the city. The school, the first contract turnaround school in Chicago, reopened in the fall of 2006 as the Sherman School of Excellence with a new staff, many of whom were graduates of AUSL's teacher residency program. AUSL's theory of action was simple: it sought to combine its teacher training residency with a school turnaround strategy to dramatically improve student achievement.

According to Michael Whitmore, who joined AUSL in 2007 as the director of the Chicago Teacher Residency and was appointed to managing director of teaching and learning in 2014, taking on school turnarounds prompted some changes in the teacher residency training model.⁷ Specifically, the challenge of turnaround required the program to better prepare teachers to succeed in some of the most challenging settings in Chicago. Mentors and residents began using [Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching](#), a research-based guide to improving teaching skills, as its source for a common language for discussing teacher practice. As a foundational text for teaching basic pedagogical and classroom management strategies, they adopted Doug Lemov's book *Teach Like a Champion*.⁸

Designing and Implementing AUSL's School Transformation Approach

AUSL's approach embraces whole-school transformation. That means starting with upgrading the school buildings and furnishings. The school district works with AUSL on renovations and bears the costs. More importantly, transformation means appointing a new principal and replacing the teaching staff. "It's all about talent," Feinstein says. "If you don't have the right people, in the right positions, doing the right work, you won't get the results." Up to 60 percent of AUSL's new hires are graduates of the Chicago Teacher Residency program, a vital talent pipeline for AUSL-managed schools. The program has graduated over 1,000 residents since 2001, 75 percent of whom continue to work in education five years after receiving their degrees. The remainder of the teaching staff comes from the ranks of experienced teachers eager to take on the special challenges of urban school transformation. AUSL believes that the entire staff must be invested in the school's turnaround mission for it to succeed. To plan for a school's smooth transition to

6 Bridgespan interview with Don Feinstein, February 9, 2017.

7 Bridgespan interview with Michael Whitmore, February 9, 2017.

8 Maureen Kelleher, "AUSL leads in teacher prep, not just turn-arounds," *The Chicago Reporter*, January 9, 2016, <http://chicagoreporter.com/ausl-leads-in-teacher-prep-not-just-turn-arounds/>.

9 "Academy for Urban School Leadership Profile," Employee Relations Strategies, <https://www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/1486-ausl-case-study.pdf>.

turnaround status, the principal and staff meet frequently over the summer preceding the start of the turnaround effort.⁹

Parent and community support is an important part of success for turnaround schools and the driving force behind AUSL’s parent and community outreach efforts. Understandably, parents may question why AUSL has been awarded a contract by the district to manage a school and why it is necessary to reconstitute the staff. However, after parents see their school reestablished with a positive school culture and a climate of high expectations for their children, many become some of AUSL’s greatest champions. In the months before officially taking over, the new principal will meet with community groups and host public forums, including picnics and school tours, for parents and community members to ask questions and voice recommendations for improving the school.

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Once school opens, teachers receive ongoing coaching to improve their classroom practices. Induction and instructional coaches address the specific needs of teachers at early-stage turnaround schools. These coaches typically work with teachers at several schools. Later-stage schools typically have a coach on staff for

full-time teacher support. In addition to the development support provided by coaches, content coordinators assist teachers and principals in specific content areas.

AUSL recognizes that excellence in staffing is necessary, but not sufficient, for achieving its ambitious goals. Principals and teachers need a way to “buffer and mitigate” the negative effects of high-poverty neighborhoods on student achievement. Building on research from prior turnaround efforts, as well as from its own experience, AUSL has codified a model called PASSAGE that provides a framework for day-to-day activity in turnaround schools. New principals and all school staff learn about the PASSAGE framework and use it to guide their detailed planning. Core elements of the PASSAGE framework consists of:¹⁰

- Positive School Culture—Creating a safe and orderly school and classroom environment and establishing effective recruitment, attendance, and discipline policies
- Action against Adversity—Engaging parents and community partners and providing proactive social supports that meet student needs
- Setting Goals and Getting It Done—Creating and working towards aggressive, transparent goals for schools, teams, and individuals
- Shared Responsibility for Achievement—Creating strong school-level leadership teams and pursuing relentless efforts to recruit, retain, and motivate high-quality staff
- Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum—Providing a college-prep K-12 curriculum and an aligned assessment system that identifies student needs and supports improved instruction

10 “Framework,” Academy for Urban School Leadership, https://www.isbe.net/Documents/ausl_lead.pdf.

- Engaging and Personalized Instruction—Providing teachers with focused professional development that ensures teacher effectiveness via the deliberate use of the Danielson framework and signature strategies for improvement

Schools receive support for implementing elements of PASSAGE. For example, to support “Positive School Culture,” AUSL provides “school environment” and “classroom environment” checklists that set common expectations across schools. In addition to providing academic support, AUSL seeks to create a classroom environment that supports students’ emotional well-being. For example, AUSL identifies and facilitates partnerships with external entities to provide services such as counseling and family life-skills programs, or engage social work interns to reach a greater number of students experiencing some sort of trauma.

From its beginning, AUSL recognized the difficulty of improving high schools and knew it had to start in elementary schools and follow its students forward. As a result, AUSL managed four elementary (pre-K–8) schools before taking on its first turnaround high school in 2008. In the following years, as it managed more schools, AUSL started to develop a feeder pattern strategy, in which AUSL “fed” students who graduated from an AUSL elementary school into an AUSL high school. This approach helped to increase the likelihood that incoming freshman would enter an AUSL high school learning at grade level. AUSL now has two successful feeder programs, one on the South Side of the city and the other on the West Side. More than 50 percent of ninth graders at these two AUSL high schools come from elementary schools that AUSL manages.

Such an ambitious approach to turning around low-performing schools requires funding beyond what the district normally furnishes. CPS provides the schools managed by AUSL with annual operational funding per pupil equivalent to that provided to all district schools. In addition to these resources, AUSL receives a management fee of approximately \$420 per student to support school management services for the duration of its five-year contracts. AUSL also turns to federal and state grants, foundations, and individual donors to fund annual added costs for teacher induction and instructional coaches, mentor teachers, and curricular enhancements.

Moving from “Good” to “Truly Excellent”

AUSL recently took a step back to assess its performance. Its leadership recognized that, although AUSL had made tremendous progress in stabilizing its schools—with increased attendance rates, decreased suspensions, and improvements in test scores—its performance was “good” but not “great,” and not yet of the standard required to prepare students for college and career success. AUSL had made progress on some—but not all—of the elements of PASSAGE. In sum, the challenge facing AUSL was how to go from “good” to “truly excellent.”

AUSL returned to its theory of action to improve its approach to both its teacher residency and professional learning programs. With a growing portfolio of schools in the past few years, it has further developed its approach to data-driven instruction with a clearly defined instructional approach, “The AUSL Way of Teaching and Learning.”

AUSL realigned the organization to better support the goal of preparing all students for college and career by establishing ambitious goals at key points in students' pre-K-12 trajectory (e.g., third grade reading, fifth grade math, eighth grade readiness for high school, college- and career-ready graduation from high school). It deepened and made consistent across the Chicago Teacher Residency and its turnaround schools the use of a developmental rubric—modeled after the framework for teaching and learning developed by Charlotte Danielson—for supporting teacher feedback and coaching and establishing standards for effective instructional practice. In partnership with the Achievement Network, an education nonprofit based in Boston, AUSL also adopted standardized interim assessments to advance instructional improvement.

AUSL also established a network, called engage AUSL, to support teachers in using curricular resources. Recognizing the critical role that professional learning plays in instructional improvement, AUSL strengthened the collaborative planning in teacher teams, data review and reflection, re-teaching, and small group instruction. Finally, to support such efforts, AUSL established clear and consistent roles across all schools for those providing professional support to teachers and principals.

Progress to Date and Path Forward

Schools in the AUSL network have delivered positive results. Performance data from 2015–2016 show that 21 of 31 schools, or 68 percent, received a Chicago School Quality Rating of 1 or 1+ on the district's five-point scale, compared with 62 percent for all Chicago public schools. Three-quarters of the AUSL schools scored in “good standing,” meaning they met or exceeded the district's minimum performance standards, a jump from just 41 percent two years earlier. (Only 10 percent had scored in “good standing” prior to AUSL taking over management.)

Beyond aggregated measures of school-level performance, individual student performance has steadily improved. Between 2013 and 2016, math and reading attainment for students in grades two through eight advanced annually, based on MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) subject matter assessments. The percentage of students reading at or above grade level grew from 29 percent to 44 percent. And the percentage of students at or above grade level in math grew from 30 percent to 43 percent. Such successes in the elementary schools and emerging signs of growth in high school are translating into success in college aspirations and admissions: in 2016, 99 percent of AUSL's graduating classes applied to college and 97 percent gained acceptance.

Having enjoyed these successes, AUSL continues to face challenges. Overall student results continue to fall short of the aspiration that all AUSL students graduate college-ready from high school. While overall student outcomes have increased at a rate that is outpacing the district, performance on the NWEA MAP remains below what is required for students to be successful in college. AUSL's high schools combat a revolving door syndrome, with 50 percent or more of students transitioning in and out of Orr and Phillips high schools each year. Exacerbating the situation, some AUSL students come from a low-performing CPS elementary school and arrive at high school far below grade level and behind students from AUSL's own elementary schools.

Despite these challenges, AUSL remains undeterred, and its ambitions remain high. AUSL aims for its schools to be the highest-rated in the district. In that regard, its goals are markedly different from those in other turnarounds in Chicago and across the country. “If you talk to districts across the country, they all say the same thing—that they want

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DONALD FEINSTEIN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AUSL

to move low-performing schools out of the bottom quartile,” says Feinstein. “We want to move our schools to the top quartile, and we want to move student improvement in parallel.”¹¹ That means annual student achievement growth that outpaces the national average and increases at a minimum of one year of growth per school year until the achievement gap is closed.

AUSL’s ultimate goal is to prepare students for social and economic mobility: as Feinstein explains, “Our children come in very far below grade level, yet our goal is to prepare them so they have a shot at the American Dream.”



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11 Bridgespan interview with Don Feinstein, February 9, 2017.

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