

Testimony to House Committee on Education & Labor
Submitted by
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Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to be here.

My name is Scott Gordon and I am the CEO of Mastery Charter Schools in Philadelphia. Mastery operates four schools serving 1,700 students in grades 7-12. Three of those schools were turnarounds of failing School District middle schools. The turnarounds were initiated at the request of the School District of Philadelphia, under then Superintendent Paul Vallas. The structure of the turnarounds required that Mastery continue operating as a neighborhood schools and enroll all of the students currently attending. So, in many ways these turnaround schools are perfect controlled experiments on school reform. The same students, the same neighborhood, the same building – the only variable that changed was the adults.

So why is this important?

To answer that question, I want to put the problem we face in secondary education in context. Let's take a moment and examine how well the current system is achieving its goals in my hometown, Philadelphia.

Every year approximately 20,000 first graders enter Philadelphia's public schools. In a globally competitive, knowledge-based economy, most of us would agree that 12 years later, we need the overwhelming majority of those 20,000 first graders to enroll and graduate from college. So, let's look at how well we are doing... With a drop-out rate of 47%, 9,400 of those students will never even make it to their high school graduation. Of the 10,600 students who remain, 2/3rds will not be able to score proficient on the Pennsylvania State Assessment. This assessment is a basic competency test – the minimum a high school student should know – and is statistically correlated with college success. Essentially that means that 2/3rds of students who receive a high school diploma will not have the skills required for post-secondary education. That leaves just 3,500 students with a shot at graduating college. 3,500 students of the 20,000 who began – a failure rate of 82%. And unfortunately the national college persistence rate for African Americans is just 40%, -- so it is likely that less than half of the students who start as college freshman will actually graduate with a degree. 20,000 students go into the system, less than 3,000 students come out of the system ready to compete in today's economy. An absolute catastrophe. Year after year. Our house is on fire. As educators, our job is to prepare young people as citizens who are productive participants in our economy. We are not even close. We are failing generations of youth in urban schools across our nation.

We do not need to tolerate this failure. In Mastery's three turnaround schools, average scores on the Pa. assessment test increased 35 percentage points per grade in every subject. Violence decreased 85%. Student turnover dropped by a third. And these

schools were Philadelphia's most difficult. Let me give you a snapshot. Shoemaker Middle School, which we turned around in 2006, was the city's 2nd most violent school. There were 2 police officers for 300 13, 14 and 15 year olds. Yet those officers were not able to prevent 8 adults from being assaulted. At the Pickett middle school, which we turned-around in 2007, just 7% of 7th graders scored proficient in reading and 9% in math. Yet, at Shoemaker it took Mastery just two years to close the achievement gap between our low-income, minority students and their state-wide peers – in fact our students are now closing the gap with the highest performing suburban schools. The school recently won the EPIC award for value added academic achievement. At the Pickett school, Mastery increased test scores over 40 percentage points in just one year.

It Can Be Done. I am here today to represent a proof point that we can turnaround failing urban schools. It can be done and it can be done quickly at scale. There are no excuses.

How?

First, we need urgency and accountability. Set the bar high. College readiness must be the bar for nearly all of our youth. Without high standards in NCLB, there will be no pressure to change our schools. You will hear critics say that standardized tests do not appropriately assess a child's learning or preparedness for college -- that they result in "teaching to the test". Why don't we hear the same outcry against AP tests? Or the SAT or ACT? As knowledge jobs move across the globe to the places that have a highly educated workforce, I don't imagine our peers in Beijing, or Seoul, or Warsaw, suggesting that the test is the problem. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development our nation has slipped to 18th in reading and 28th in Math in international rankings of education. It is not because we are teaching to the test. It is because our students can't pass the test. We need more accountability, not less. Do not water-down NCLB requirements.

Second, we need to ruthlessly focus on outcomes. Grow what works and eliminate what doesn't. We exercise this type of common sense in every area of our society – except education. In education, there is an ongoing conversation about process and means. At the high school level, conferences are filled with lively debates about making the curriculum more "relevant" and "project-based" and about creating "learning communities". Endless debates continue over the growth of charter schools. Don't listen. Instead, as policy makers I urge you to focus on outcomes and accountability and not the means. The house is on fire. Reward whoever produces results now.

In education, we have the notion that schools operate differently than the rest of the economy – schools are not like traditional businesses because "kids are not widgets". They are not. But adults are still adults – and the common sense management practices that drive successful organizations – be they hospitals, software companies, or schools – are the same. High performing organizations set clear goals. They hold management and employees accountable for results. They measure progress continually and adjust to meet changing conditions. They hire the highest quality talent, and promote the best. They supervise staff, monitoring and supporting their performance. They promote the high performers and exit non-performers --basic

functions of management. In contrast, at most public schools, pay is based on seniority or educational degrees that have no proven relationship with student outcomes. Folks are promoted based on their certifications, not performance. Teachers are observed for 45 minutes twice a year. As a field we don't attract the best and brightest. We don't fire the worst. We quibble over whether we should extend teachers' contract to an 8 hour day. We have an 82% failure rate -- I can assure you it will take an 8 hour day to put out this fire. Imagine running an organization where you do not set goals for your staff, where you do not supervise them, and you do not reward good performance or respond to low performance.

By setting the bar high and by demanding accountability, you will force education to change. You can accelerate that change by rewarding what works and penalizing what doesn't. Encourage failing schools to be closed and turn them around. In Philadelphia, under the leadership of our new Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, we are going to close up to 35 schools over the next four years. Turnaround managers such as Mastery, as well as internal District turnaround teams, will be contracted to turnaround these schools. Those who succeed will have the opportunity to manage additional schools. Those who don't produce results, will lose their contract. Simple. Support bold initiatives like this. By creating an accountability system, we can leverage what works to put pressure for systems change.

Thank you for your time.