

**Remarks by Jarvis Sanford, Managing Director of Elementary Schools,  
Academy for Urban School Leadership  
At Department of Education Press Conference Regarding “Race to the Top” Fund  
July 24, 2009**

Thank you, Mr. Secretary. What an honor it is to be here with you today to showcase the school transformation model that you were instrumental in bringing to our city as the CEO of Chicago Public Schools.

Few would argue that there is a single solution to fix our public education system. There are a lot of talented people – many of them here in this room today – who have dedicated themselves to giving all of our nation’s children access to a quality education. We may talk about different models of education reform, but we’re committed to the same goal. We all want a first-class education for our children and we all know it is imperative if we are to remain a first-class nation.

For the students who are served by neighborhood schools in cities like Chicago, the Academy for Urban School Leadership brings a particular model for school transformation. It’s a model that is tailored to address the needs and challenges of some of the city’s worst performing schools in some of the poorest neighborhoods. And it is a model that has demonstrated success.

AUSL school turnaround works, and creates successful students, because of two things: top-to-bottom school transformation, and special teacher training. At AUSL, we have ambitious goals. We won’t settle for incremental improvement; we’re after significant change. We want to hit the “reset button” on our schools, and do it without any disruption to the education of our students.

Since 2006, all of our schools have seen consistent improvement, both in academics and in non-academic measures like attendance, discipline and parent engagement. This year, three of our four turnaround elementary schools had over 50 percent of students meeting or exceeding the state standard. All three of these schools will be off probation for the first time in over eight years.

Before we took over our first turnaround, the Sherman School of Excellence, just one in four students was meeting or exceeding state standards. This past year, after three years of AUSL management, more than half of Sherman students met or exceeded state standards.

That track record of success is being duplicated at our more recent turnaround schools. Mr. Duncan, you may have special appreciation for the improvement at the Harvard School of Excellence, one of the schools you visited earlier this year. Our Harvard students have improved almost 25 percentage points on the state test in just two years of AUSL management.

Let me paint a picture for you of what these schools were like before AUSL began the turnaround process. These were schools in which student discipline and attendance were a persistent problem, and many parents and community members despaired of ever seeing significant change. The transformation that AUSL has achieved has won over some of our toughest critics, many of whom are our own school parents and community members.

One example is the Reverend Charlie Walker, a local Baptist minister and grandfather of a child at one of our schools. Reverend Walker freely admits that, at first, he was outspoken in his criticism of the turnaround in his neighborhood school, fearing it was something that was being “pushed off on the community.” But then he got a call from the principal, Mr. Poole, who invited him to come see the school. This is a man who initially told Mr. Poole that the school transformation wasn’t going to work, but now freely admits that he was wrong. He is now one of our strongest supporters.

So how do we achieve this kind of transformation? Our approach relies on two main ingredients: public school teachers who are specially trained in our teaching residency program and selected for the challenges of urban schools; and the creation of an entirely new school culture and climate of success.

Over the summer, we build a new school team with a highly qualified staff of union teachers, and we overhaul the school with new equipment, renovated facilities and new programs. We give our students and communities schools they can be proud of.

The turnaround model has had a significant and welcome impact on the entire community in each school’s neighborhood. We work with everyone involved, including parents and community members, to help create high expectations and opportunities in an environment where great teachers, school leaders and students can flourish.

We’ve seen that students welcome the consistency as well as the safety, security and higher expectations that become part of the culture of a turnaround school. This has reduced disciplinary problems and resulted in a new level of respect from students, parents and the community. The changes in attitude and behavior have been extraordinary.

Turning around a school creates a new climate and culture of success, based on high expectations for student achievement and supported by new school leaders, teachers, programs and facility improvements, and other upgrades.

While our turnaround schools remain part of the Chicago Public Schools district, this model gives our school leadership real autonomy to transform the school’s culture and curriculum. We rely on a variety of tools to continually assess student needs and determine if they are being met. Teachers have immediate access to the results, so they know what needs to be done to supplement the curriculum and meet the needs of individual students.

AUSL achieves something that I'm personally very proud to be part of. I'm privileged to see children who were once written off as failures begin to excel at school; children who had been struggling or, worse, not even showing up for class. That's a profound thing to witness. I'm inspired every day by the dedication of our principals, teachers and staff. And I'm especially moved by the response we've seen from our communities.

Like Catonya Withers, mother of four children at Harvard and chairperson of the school's Local Advisory School Council. Secretary Duncan, you may remember meeting Ms. Withers. She describes Harvard before the AUSL turnaround as a school at which every day there was a police paddy wagon, a fire truck or an ambulance. Or Wanda Wilburn, mother of three children at Harvard, who says that before AUSL, she thought they might as well tear Harvard down and make it a parking lot. It was that bad. But these two parents and many like them have seen their schools transformed. And to them it is a miracle.

The turnaround process is hard work. Not every school will respond in the same way in the same time frame. But for the sake of our children, we cannot be satisfied anything less than dramatic improvement. As long as comprehensive school reform continues to foster this kind of ongoing improvement, we will steadily close the achievement gap in American public education.

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