

## Teachers at the Heart of Student Success

### **INTRO**

It is truly awesome to look out at this army of people who are changing lives and, by doing so, lifting the teaching profession to the level of prestige it deserves. As someone who, like you, has gone into teaching, I understand why you came to this profession. And while we may sometimes lose sight of it when we're planning lessons or reviewing assessments or helping a student make the right choice about his or her actions, what you are doing is changing, and sometimes saving, lives.

This noble act is reflected in the name of your organization – Alliance College-Ready Public Schools. Helping students become college-ready saves lives, because we know what happens when students don't graduate high school. And we also know what happens when students don't earn a post-secondary credential. In the current recession, unemployment is twice as high for students who only have a high school diploma compared to those with a bachelor degree or higher. It's also estimated that within the next decade, more than 60% of jobs will require some level of post-secondary education. You've recognized the inequity that exists in public education today, and the mission of your organization, from the Board to the classroom, is to reverse it.

I've heard this commitment in your schools when I've been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to talk with Alliance school leaders, teachers, and especially students. The students tell it best – and I've heard countless Alliance students contrast their experience inside an Alliance school with other education experiences. And when they do that, the first thing they talk about is you – their teachers. You care. You excite. You help. You listen. You keep them honest. You change their lives. You set them on a trajectory to a post-secondary education, and you change their lives. You're at the heart of student

success and you take this responsibility seriously, always striving to get better at what you do. That's one of the reasons I'm honored to talk to you this morning, and it is part of why our foundation feels privileged to be able to support the Alliance and its teachers and school leaders.

When I'm finished this morning, I hope you come away from here with two things: (1) The first is that, through the work you are doing as part of The College-Ready Promise, the Alliance is a national leader in supporting effective teaching. (2) The second, and it's not one that we talk about often enough, is that you individually and collectively as educators have a voice about this profession -- and what it means to be an educator who is changing lives -- that needs to be heard. We're at too important a point in the national dialogue right now for your voices not to part of shaping the future of this profession.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Before I discuss the Alliance's role as a national leader, I first want to acknowledge some of the people in this organization who support you in changing lives. Working closely these past years with Judy Burton, Marcee Seegan, Valerie Braimah, and others in the Alliance organization, I've seen how tirelessly they work on your behalf and on the behalf of the youth in your schools. This organization has changed a lot of lives in a relatively short span of existence, and their leadership is a big factor in that. So too is the leadership of the Alliance Board of Directors, another group I've gotten to know well, and another group whose passion for changing the lives of youth in this city is limitless. Tony Ressler, Frank Baxter, and the rest of the Board members have done a tremendous job of guiding this organization and I couldn't leave here today without acknowledging them for that impact. I also want to take a moment to introduce my colleague at the foundation, Kate Ford. Kate is a successful educator and charter leader, and as your program officer she will be working closely with the Alliance and other College-Ready Promise charter organizations.

## **FOUNDATION**

Since I've just introduced Kate, let me say a few words about our work at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Our work at the foundation is guided by the belief that all lives have equal value, and our goal is that every person has the opportunity to live a healthy, productive life. In the United States, most of our work focuses on education – at the secondary and post-secondary levels – because a successful education provides the greatest avenue to opportunity in our country. Our largest area of funding in the US is directed at the goal of all students graduating high school college-ready. Sound familiar? By college-ready we mean able to enroll in a post-secondary program (technical, two-year, four-year) without any need for remediation.

To help the nation reach this goal of all students graduating college-ready, we are funding three primary areas of work, each of which influences directly the work that teachers and students do together. Because at the end of the day, that is where lives are saved and lives are changed – in the work that teachers and students do together.

The first area is focused on helping to create, identify, and spread the tools or supports students and teachers need for powerful classroom learning. We're aligning these efforts with the Common Core Standards that more than 40 states have adopted, and we're excited about what those mean for teachers and students – fewer, clearer, higher standards for learning that were built from the bottom up with college-readiness in mind.

The second area we're funding is focused on next generation models of learning that enhance the opportunities for students to become college-ready by harnessing technology to personalize learning experiences and help students achieve mastery at a pace and in a style that is right for them. Some of

your schools are innovating in this area, and we believe there is huge potential here to better serve students and also to enhance supports for teachers.

## **EFFECTIVE TEACHING**

The third area we are focused on is empowering effective teaching, and this is where our partnership with your organization has been strongest and where the Alliance is breaking new ground as a national leader. The evidence has been clear for many years now that the single greatest factor inside a school that impacts student achievement is the effectiveness of teaching. Studies have shown that the difference between the impact of a highly effective teacher and a less effective teacher can be up to 10%ile points in growth a year for an average student. Imagine the impact of this discrepancy when it persists for two or three years in a row. In fact, in one study, it was found that students in high poverty schools (more than 90%) were 2.5 times as likely to experience less effective teaching than students in the wealthiest schools where there was less than 10% poverty.

We've known teachers are at the heart of student success for a long time, and yet in public education we haven't developed real systems for measuring teacher performance, for giving teachers meaningful feedback, for targeting supports for improvement, and for recognizing and rewarding effective teaching that helps change lives. But the Alliance, and a small group of other CMOs and public school districts are leading the nation in helping the field discover a different way. Almost two years ago, our foundation awarded more than \$300 million to eight communities where teachers, district leaders, school board leadership, and the broader community have made a commitment to changing student lives by improving effective teaching. This exciting work is occurring in Tampa Florida, Memphis Tenn, Pittsburgh Penn, and other places including here in Los Angeles with The College-Ready Promise, a consortium of

charter organizations that serves more than 30,000 students in more than 90 schools, and of which the Alliance is a member.

These are uncommon places, but there are common themes that run throughout their work, not the least of which is the courage to change the culture of a profession in which feedback has been inconsistent and improvement has too often been left to chance.

Each of these communities responded to an RFP from the foundation and is currently undertaking work in four major areas: (1) Implementing Better Measures of Teacher Performance; (2) Strengthening Supports for Teachers; (3) Recognizing and Rewarding Effective Teaching; and (4) Staffing Schools and Classrooms Strategically for Student Success. Let me say a bit more about each of these areas.

### **Better Measures of Teacher Performance**

Like the Alliance, all of these places have put in place new systems for teacher evaluation that incorporate multiple measures of teacher performance, all of which are intended to improve the amount and quality of information about what is happening in the classroom and how successfully teachers are improving student achievement.

These measures include teacher impact on student achievement growth over time (value-added or student growth percentiles where those data are available), because that is an important measure of student learning, and these measures also include feedback from students, from families, from peers; as well as observations of practice that are conducted by administrators, and in some cases, peer colleagues. These data are being collected over multiple years and provide better information not only to reach summative conclusions about performance, but also to pinpoint areas of practice where additional support will help teachers grow, and by virtue of that, help students be more successful.

Large scale research is also supporting this work – we’re funding a two-year study of 3000 urban teachers called the Measures of Effective Teaching project – and that project aims to produce more evidence about fair, credible measures that can be used for evaluation and to provide more meaningful performance feedback.

When it comes to measures, the sites we're supporting are seeing that there are no perfect measures – we'll never have perfect information -- but that good measures, used well and made better over time, can have a real impact.

### **Strengthening Supports for Teachers**

One dimension of that impact is the ability to become much more focused and targeted about the supports that are offered teachers to help them improve. To differentiate support for teachers just like we strive to differentiate supports for students. One of the tools that is improving the ability of places to do that is the rubric for observation of teacher practice that each site is using as part of their system of evaluation and support. These rubrics are helping to take the guesswork out of what is good practice – they're making clear and explicit the kinds of behaviors (student and teacher) that one would expect to see in a classroom with highly effective teaching. And while the evidence for and quality of these rubrics will continue to get stronger over time, already they are driving important changes in the conversations that teachers are having with each other and with administrators and district or CMO leaders.

When we are clear and descriptive about what good practice looks like, it allows teachers to better assess where and how they can improve – which we want to do because we know that our improvement translates into our students' improvement. It also allows those who are supporting teachers to be clearer about the practices they are supporting. Educators align their expectations, they calibrate their language, and they build real capacity to improve -- and that increases students opportunities for success.

This virtuous cycle of support is emerging for teachers at all stages of their careers and at all levels of performance. It should never stop. Places are just now glimpsing the opportunities in this area, and I think we'll see significant innovations in how teachers are supported emerging in the coming years. I wouldn't be surprised to see some of those innovations come from you.

### **Recognizing and Rewarding Effective Teaching**

Not only are these communities beginning to differentiate supports for teachers in meaningful ways, but like the Alliance they are also taking steps to recognize and reward highly effective teaching that is

having the greatest impact on student learning. These communities are creating meaningful milestones in a teacher's career – milestones that demonstrate accomplishment, that are reflected in compensation, and that offer effective teachers additional roles and responsibilities in the classroom that allow them to grow their impact. In Pittsburgh Public Schools, they're creating a corps of highly effective teachers across content areas to loop with 9<sup>th</sup> grade students starting high school through 10<sup>th</sup> grade, because they know how many students they lose during that time period and what the positive impact will be of having the most effective teachers with those students at that time in their careers. This is a prestigious role that brings with it extra pay, and it serves to help recognize excellent performance in a way that can change the lives of underserved youth in that community.

### **Staffing Strategically for Student Success**

This example from Pittsburgh also illustrates how places are thinking about strategic staffing. By strategic staffing, I mean ensuring that students who have historically been underserved and who would benefit most from highly effective teaching have access to that – every day and in every class. That's consistent with the mission of Alliance College-Ready Public schools and it is the need you often fill, as charter schools, in the neighborhoods you serve.

### **Other areas**

In addition to work in these four areas, these communities have similarly identified a number of related areas of focus that enable this work to happen – including improving their data systems and focusing on principal and administrator leadership. In short, they, like you, are working hard to organize their classrooms, their schools, and their systems around growth in student achievement and the teaching practice that will ensure that.

### **Teacher Voice**

There is another aspect of the work that is occurring across these communities, though, that I want to highlight for you, and it connects to the second point I wanted to make today. Across the board in these cities, this work to change the profession and to change the lives of youth is being done *with* teachers and not *to* teachers. With teachers at the table, with teacher input in the process from day one, and with ongoing teacher feedback on areas for improvement, this work is happening in a way that gives us great hope for success and for the sustainability of that success. Because if teachers don't believe this work will help them continuously improve and make their students more successful as a result, it won't

last. As an example, the Memphis community just launched a huge campaign: I Teach. I Am to raise awareness of the excellent teachers in that district and to enlist support for a set of principles about effective teaching and its importance for changing lives. You can check it out on the internet at [iteachiam.net](http://iteachiam.net).

You wouldn't always know this amazing work is happening, though, given what is often said or read in the public dialogue. The notions that school systems can "hire and fire" their way to success or simply provide incentives for better performance gets a lot of attention. That's absolutely not what this work is. And you, individually and collectively, can help people understand that.

This work is about continuing to improve how teachers change the lives of the youth around them. By getting good data about your practice and your students' learning, by being supported to get better at what you do, by realizing new opportunities to have impact inside the classroom, and by playing a role in changing the teaching profession.

You have a voice about the work that you're doing that should be heard, not only inside the Alliance organization but also across this city, state, and country. You're committed to improving college-readiness rates for underserved youth across this city, and you're building the opportunity to make that impact on the foundation of effective teaching. I hope you will share that message.

And when you do, I hope it doesn't get obscured or misunderstood because of the fact that Alliance public schools are charter schools. For years the conversations about public education in Los Angeles have drawn too much distinction between "charter schools" – "district schools". This isn't about charter schools – remember, the work is happening in traditional public school districts too – it's about what it means to be a successful teacher of youth who have been historically underserved, and how achieving that accomplishment changes lives.



## **CONCLUSION**

I hope what I've shared this morning helps put the work you're doing every day into a larger context, and I hope it also reinforces how critical it is that you share what you're doing and the difference it is making.

The Gates Foundation is privileged to have the opportunity to support the Alliance to empower effective teaching, and we have a ton of respect for how hard you're working at it and what you will do with the learning you'll gain along the way. Please keep getting better at what you do, and please keep changing lives of the youth in this city.

Best of luck to each of you in this coming school year and thank you for the opportunity to be with you this morning.