PARTNERSHIP SCHOOLS: FOCUS. EXCELLENCE. SUPPORT.

Partnership Schools is a network of six urban Catholic schools in Harlem and the South Bronx, animated by talented teachers and leaders, and supported by a central team of nationally recognized education, finance, and operational leaders.

Our approach emphasizes the importance of:
- **Focus**: At Partnership Schools, we do more with less.
- **Excellence**: We believe that if you pursue excellence, success will follow.
- **Support**: We believe our teachers and leaders can thrive with the right mix of support and accountability.

INTRODUCTION

*Efficiency is doing things right. Effectiveness is doing the right things.*

—Peter Drucker

In his groundbreaking book, Good to Great, Jim Collins examined the difference between those organizations that were good, and those that were able to cross the threshold to achieve sustained, game-changing, and enduring excellence. Collins explains:

“In each of these dramatic, remarkable, good-to-great corporate transformations, we found the same thing: There was no miracle moment. Instead, a down-to-earth, pragmatic, committed-to-excellence process—a framework—kept each company, its leaders, and its people on track for the long haul.”

When the “education reform movement” began more than two decades ago, there was general agreement that schools needed to improve after years of decline, but little progress had been made. The reform movement provided much-needed innovation. Trailblazing educators and maverick leaders worked to change a system that had lost sight of its core goals.

Thanks to these pioneers, the conversation has changed. Accountability is now the norm in schools, not the exception. Teachers are expected to focus on what students have learned, not just what content has been taught. Disadvantaged parents, particularly those in urban areas, have been empowered with increased educational choices.

More importantly, these changes have improved student outcomes. Graduation rates are up, the national achievement gap, while still unacceptable, has narrowed, and across the country, we have a growing number of outstanding schools proving what’s possible in urban education.

Ironically, though, change has now become the norm. So much so that teachers and leaders are weary. They struggle to improve in an environment where innovation is sometimes prized over excellence.

At Partnership Schools, we focus on doing more with less; but on striving for excellence in everything we do. Our network model draws on the lessons of the reform pioneers who’ve come before us, but through the lens of the discipline and focus that Collins’s framework demands.

That is to say: we will not do everything. But everything we do, we’ll do well.

Partnership Schools: *Keep what’s working, change what’s not*
closing Catholic school, they have yet to find a way to reverse the negative effects felt by the neighborhood.¹

In other words, we must recognize that there is much about urban Catholic schools that works: from their focus on building character and providing a values-driven education; to their commitment to subsidiarity and the strength that comes from empowering leaders to make essential decisions about staffing, finance, and facilities; from the emphasis on academic rigor, to the centrality of community service; and from the focus on preparing students to persist in college, to the emphasis on preparing students to be civically engaged in adulthood. Indeed, these have been the bedrock of Catholic education for more than 150 years. And they have been instrumental in lifting generations of students and families out of poverty.

For that reason, while we understand the urgency of our work, we also respect the traditions and the strengths of our teachers, leaders, and school communities. Our school support plans and programs emphasize the importance of building on the strong foundations that exist in our schools, while empowering our teachers and leaders with the tools they need to thrive.

PARTNERSHIP SCHOOLS SUPPORT

Below we describe three areas where we provide targeted, strategically chosen, and centralized support to our schools:

1. Academics
2. Operations
3. Talent

You will note that this list is finite; that it does not imply a future where three becomes ten. You will notice we do not discuss the centrality of technology, nor do we imply that you will walk into our schools and see innovation—at least not as it’s commonly conceived.

These are choices, not oversight or omissions. As Drucker said in the opening quote, “efficiency is doing things right. Effectiveness is doing the right thing.”

We seek to be both: efficient in the work we do, but effective by narrowing the scope of our work and choosing wisely where we will spend our time and money.

These choices are born of necessity, but they are also welcome constraints that we believe will drive excellence in our schools.

For starters, our schools spend $10,500 per pupil. We are committed to building a network of excellent schools at a fraction of the per pupil of neighboring public and charter schools. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate—as Catholic schools long have—that you can achieve excellence on a budget.

Artists speak of “art through adversity.” The idea is that great art is born not from excess, but from constraint. And we believe that the constraint of keeping costs down is both necessary and, particularly in urban Catholic education, welcome. It forces school leaders to make the tough choices to lead their schools from good to great.

PARTNERSHIP SCHOOLS: ACADEMICS

The strength of the Partnership Schools academic model is drawn from three areas:

1. The strong culture that has driven the historic success of Catholic schools.
2. The instructional innovation that charter leaders and reform pioneers have tried and honed over the past two decades.
3. The content we know all students—especially our nation’s most disadvantaged students—need to succeed at the highest levels.

CULTURE

Catholic schools are the only nonpublic schools to serve disadvantaged students at scale. And the best among them have success rates that rival some of the best charter schools.

But more than that, the success that graduates from urban Catholic schools have achieved are enduring. Where-as top-performing Charter Management Organizations

¹ “Using data obtained from a survey conducted by the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods in 1995, the authors show that residents of neighborhoods where Catholic schools closed had less cohesive and more disorderly communities than residents of neighborhoods with open Catholic schools. While serious crime declined across the city of Chicago between 1999–2005, it declined more slowly in police beats where Catholic schools closed. In contrast to the city-wide average of a 25 percent decline, serious crime fell by only 17 percent in police beats experiencing a school closure. Between 1999 and 2005, the presence of an open Catholic school in a police beat was consistently associated with a statistically significant decrease in crime. Although the percentage difference varied by year, the crime rate in police beats with Catholic schools was, on average, at least 33 percent lower than in police beats without them.” (Lost Classrooms, Lost Communities, Margaret F. Brinig and Nicole Stelle Garnett, 2014)
(CMO) struggle to figure out how to ensure their students thrive long after they leave their schools, Catholic school graduates do well. They graduate from high school at higher rates, they go on to college in greater numbers, and perhaps most importantly, they persist and do well in college.

We believe that these historic successes stem from the strong, intentional, and faith-filled cultures and values that are central to urban Catholic education.

Therefore, our first focus area is on school culture. And, to that end, we aim to bring the same intentionality to our culture that we have brought to our curriculum and instruction. By intentionally weaving together our faith, values, and character education with our curricular and instructional vision, we can build strong, individual school cultures that exemplify community, that build character, and that bring the instructional urgency and focus that we know our students need to close the content and skills gaps with which they come to us.

That said, bringing increased intentionality and focus does not mean a radical transformation. Indeed, Catholic schools have done this well for more than 150 years—and we seek to build and improve on that legacy, not to change it.

**INSTRUCTION**

One area where charter leaders and CMOs have excelled over the past 20 years is in their articulation of what effective instruction looks like. Leaders have systematically studied and learned from effective teachers, and leaders like Doug Lemov, one of our partners, have helped translate those lessons into action.

We are borrowing heavily from those lessons and using them to inform our work every day.

But, critically, leaders like Doug Lemov warn that effective teaching doesn’t look earth-shattering or different. Effective teaching involves mastery of a number of simple tools, and it demands the careful use of those tools in the classroom every day. Indeed, Lemov explains:

“Mastery of tools does not just allow creation; it informs it. The process is often far from glamorous; an artist’s life is a tradesman’s life, really, characterized by calluses and stone dust, requiring diligence and humility, but its rewards are immense.”

So, when you walk into our classrooms, you won’t necessarily see pomp and circumstance. But you should see the quiet, effective engagement and instruction of teachers who are continuing to hone the tools and skills that drive student learning in the classroom.

**CONTENT**

One of the things that sets us apart from some of the high profile CMOs is that we are as attentive to what students are learning in the classroom as we are to how teachers are teaching it.

So, when you visit our classrooms, you’ll hear students being asked about and engaging in rigorous content. When you walk into our preK through fifth grade classrooms during what would traditionally be called “reading” or “language arts,” you will hear students discussing history and science. Our fifth graders are reading Don Quixote and our fourth graders are learning about the Middle Ages. We embrace the belief that “teaching content is teaching reading.”

And this is the difference we bring. We are in a time where people believe, because we all have access to Google, that what you teach isn’t as important as how you teach or how students interact with what they are learning. We disagree. We believe, and a growing body of research supports, that what you teach is at least as important—perhaps more so.

Moreover, we understand that our students come to us without the foundational knowledge or experiences that middle or high-income students take for granted. They don’t have the vocabulary and often don’t hear the same conversations at home. And so we employ a content-rich curriculum to fill those gaps for them. These curricular choices are central to our model. They give our students what they need to succeed not just on state tests, but in high school, college, and beyond.

It is important to note that this focus on content as the driver of daily instruction has shifted our approach to data-driven instruction. Many schools have embraced the idea of using interim assessments to track student achievement across the school year. Most often, these interim assessments are aligned to the state standards and are separate from the curriculum teachers use to drive planning and instruction each day. And this is seen as a virtue. Schools embrace the idea of “standards-driven instruction,” where teachers or network leaders cobble together a scope and sequence or a curriculum from a variety of programs.

At Partnership Schools, we reject this approach—which is standards-centric but curriculum-neutral. Instead, we use the state standards to guide our curricular choices, but then we use the curriculum to drive our planning, instruction, and assessment. That is to say, the sequence of curricular content and the way skills and content are built over time, are essential to student mastery and student success. Therefore, we choose our curriculum carefully and work to ensure that our teachers and leaders are armed with the guidance and the tools they need to unlock the full potential.
of the programs we’ve chosen. We collect data from curriculum assessments—chapter and unit tests—centrally and use those results to drive professional development, and teacher- and school-support plans. This shift may seem subtle or inconsequential, but we have found it transformative.

**PARTNERSHIP SCHOOLS: OPERATIONS**

We know that students learn best when their teachers and school leaders share a mindset and commitment to excellence, are equipped with the right tools, and have ample support to focus their time and energy on their classrooms. That is why our schools leverage a centrally-supported operations and finance program to ensure the educational experience of our students is never diluted by the non-educational enterprises of a school.

At the school level, this means that each principal is supported by a director of school operations who makes sure their school is efficiently managed, compliant, and safe, freeing up the principal to help both teachers and students reach their fullest potential.

In the network office, a team of accomplished leaders manages our human resource, development, and fiscal policies and procedures to identify and address school operational challenges, leverage economies of scale, and concentrate the school’s daily activities on improving educational outcomes.

**PARTNERSHIP SCHOOLS: TALENT**

Ensuring that we have sufficient access to top tier teachers and leaders is a critical lever in the Partnership Schools turnaround effort.

In the past, our principals—like school leaders at most K–8 parochial schools—were responsible for advertising, screening, interviewing, and hiring all teachers and staff.

This responsibility, combined with the fact that New York City is perhaps the most competitive market for qualified, high-potential teachers and school leaders, made it difficult to identify and hire high-potential teachers and leaders. There are dozens of high-performing charter schools, big name private schools, and innovative traditional public schools. Additionally, many schools and CMOs have well-established recruitment efforts, generous salary and benefits packages, and strong name recognition.

It quickly became clear that we needed to pursue recruitment intentionally. And, we needed to find a way to stand out as an unique alternative in a crowded field.

To that end, we centralized a few components of our teacher recruiting efforts to reduce the burden our principals felt, while also expanding the pool of quality applicants per open position. We centralized efforts we knew would benefit from economies of scale, and we devolved to the school-level other talent decisions in order to best incorporate the deep knowledge and experiences our leadership teams have crafting culture in their schools.

**THE ROAD AHEAD**

As we look to the future, we have reason to be optimistic. We have plans that we believe will help our students continue to demonstrate achievement gains in the years ahead, and we have a talented team in place to make that a reality.

We are also now proud to be at the forefront of a nationwide Catholic school renaissance—a rebirth and renewed commitment to saving urban Catholic schools. We’ve received media attention on the hard work happening in our schools and the transparency with which we share our results. This is certainly exciting, but we also understand that the renaissance is about something much bigger than saving the six schools in the Partnership:

- It demonstrates a renewed commitment to excellence in urban Catholic education.
- It’s about redoubling our commitment to providing disadvantaged families with the choices they deserve and the faith-based education they so value and that they so desire.
- It’s about reminding the nation—and maybe even ourselves—of the unique place Catholic schools occupy in the history of American education.
- And it’s about recommitting ourselves, as Catholic school leaders, to the feisty and fearless spirit of and to the model of audacious leadership that our founders provided.

We are committed to continuing to raise the bar for our students, and to influencing the urban Catholic Schools movement in year three. That said, the road ahead of us will be at least as difficult, if not more difficult, than the one we’ve traveled to date. Over the past three years, we believe that we’ve knocked off a lot of “low hanging fruit”—i.e., we’ve made changes that have righted the ship and set us on the right course. But moving from the very low proficiency levels we had in 2014 to the levels at which our students perform today will undoubtedly prove easier than moving from where we are today to where we want and need to be in the future. So, while we are excited to continue forward, we understand that our work has only just begun.