

# THE SECRET TO SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

SLOW AND STEADY WINS  
THE RACE

EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY



**BY PUBLIC IMPACT**

JULI KIM, ELAINE HARGRAVE,  
AND VERONICA BROOKS-UY

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**The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools'** mission is to transform schools and revolutionize school systems to empower all students with a high-quality education. For more on the Partnership, please visit [www.partnershipla.org](http://www.partnershipla.org).

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Like many large districts in urban U.S. cities, L.A. Unified struggles to produce strong results for all students. On 2015–16 end-of-year state tests, 60 percent of students did not meet state standards in English language arts (ELA).<sup>1</sup> Students fared even worse in math: 70 percent performed below grade level.<sup>2</sup> High-need students are struggling the most: 95 percent of English language learners performed below grade level in both math and ELA;<sup>3</sup> among economically disadvantaged students, 66 percent performed below grade level in ELA and 76 percent in math.<sup>4</sup>

Eleven years ago, outcomes for students were even bleaker. A 2006 study found that the district’s graduation rate was at 44 percent, placing L.A. Unified sixth from the bottom of the nation’s 50 largest school districts in graduation rates.<sup>5</sup>

That’s when the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools entered the scene. As an independent nonprofit organization with a mission “to transform schools and revolutionize school systems to empower all students with a high-quality education,” the Partnership has worked since 2007 to improve some of Los Angeles’ lowest-performing schools and has achieved strong results. The overwhelming majority—about 90 percent of its schools—have improved student outcomes, and 60 percent have improved student outcomes significantly.<sup>6</sup> Most notably, the high schools that joined the Partnership have increased graduation rates to more than 80 percent, on average, with graduation rates at four of the five Partnership high schools exceeding the district rate in 2016.<sup>7</sup>

## *The Partnership’s mission is to transform schools and revolutionize school systems to empower all students with a high-quality education.*

How has the Partnership brought such dramatic change to these students and schools? The key to its success lies in its unique model. L.A. Unified lets the Partnership manage a set of the district’s highest-need schools, but it is organizationally distinct from the district. Working side by side with district staff to provide strategic support and advocacy for L.A. Unified’s lowest-performing schools, the Partnership gains insight into the barriers that impede success in all high-need schools and the changes needed to turn them around. But because it is operationally independent of the district, the Partnership can use private dollars and community partnerships to supplement—rather than replace or replicate—the supports and resources the district provides to traditional public schools to help them build their capacity to achieve stronger student outcomes.

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**E**stablished with a 10-year, \$50 million grant from leading Southern California philanthropists Richard and Melanie Lundquist, the Partnership provides hands-on management and instructional support to 18 schools in Los Angeles—nine elementary, four middle, and five high schools—in three of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. The Partnership’s work focuses on building school capacity to create and sustain long-term change, and has five important characteristics:

**Work with the district.** The Partnership exists separately from L.A. Unified but works within its structures and schools. That allows it to work both alongside the district as a partner and as an external advocate for access to all district and community resources needed to improve student outcomes in high-need schools. Its unique “in-district” status is undergirded by a memorandum of understanding with the district that outlines both school management responsibilities the Partnership must undertake and charter-like flexibilities from district rules and practices that the Partnership may exercise in the schools it supports. Though being “in-district” means the Partnership works within the same constraints governing all public schools (such as collective bargaining agreements), it also gives the Partnership firsthand knowledge of the factors that negatively affect high-need schools and students, and the opportunity to innovate from within and help the district effect systemic changes gradually.

**Use private funds in a nimble, focused manner.** Working within the district gives the Partnership access to all district supports and structures, such as food and transportation services, so it can focus its own resources on providing new services or enhancing existing ones needed to boost students’ academic success. In addition, the Partnership provides its schools with a level of intense support that the district cannot achieve given its large volume of schools and limited resources. The Partnership’s size also allows it to test new programs and connect schools to community-based organizations with greater ease and efficiency than the district. Its size and status as an independent nonprofit allows the Partnership to be nimble in a way that helps attract private resources from funders who might shy away from investing in a large urban school bureaucracy.

*The Partnership’s work focuses on building school capacity to create and sustain long-term change.*

**Focus on key levers of school transformation.** The Partnership's work focuses on what research and experience reveal are the most important drivers of school improvement and strong student performance.

- **Great school leaders.** The Partnership has autonomy to select principals for its schools, give them authority over critical school-based decisions, and provide intensive coaching and supports designed to build the capacities of principals and assistant principals to develop and implement strategic school plans and lead the instructional leadership teams that help execute school and student growth strategies. The Partnership pays more from its philanthropic funding to attract, support, and retain great leaders, and holds them accountable for changes in schools that drive dramatic improvements in student outcomes. With a specially designed Partnership Implementation Framework, the Partnership monitors school progress and assesses both individual practice and quality of school systems.
- **Highly effective teaching.** The Partnership has worked to ensure that when vacancies arise, its schools can hire strong teacher candidates who can meet the needs of their students. The Partnership also provides the coaching, professional development, and classroom supports that teachers need to continuously improve their practice. In addition, the Partnership cultivates cadres of teacher-leaders who constitute the instructional leadership teams that work with school leaders to execute and sustain strategies and practices that drive school transformation and improved student outcomes.
- **Engaging parents and community partners.** Grounded in the belief that parents are essential to their child's academic success, the Partnership focuses on raising parents' awareness of what is happening at their children's schools, building the capacity of schools to effectively engage parents, and cultivating a strategic mix of local and national community-based partners with expertise to help meet the individualized needs and performance goals of its schools. Through its signature program, Parent College, the Partnership teaches parents to engage in their children's education and advocate for their educational needs.

**Make schools and classrooms restorative communities.** Based on the premise that school climate affects teacher effectiveness and student achievement, the Partnership has implemented restorative practices in its schools to create an environment conducive to learning. By working with schools to proactively develop a healthy school culture, the Partnership is addressing school culture and climate issues that contribute to student absenteeism, disciplinary issues, and students leaving school before graduation.

**Model the actions needed district-wide for systemic change.** Through its work in district schools, the Partnership experiences firsthand state and district policies that impede school transformation. But as a nonprofit independent of the district, it has the ability and capacity to illuminate those barriers, call for change, identify change partners, and develop new approaches that lead the way to change. The Partnership has pursued systemic change using several strategies, including advocacy, pilot programs that address policies and practices that impede student success, and legal action challenging laws and policies that create inequities between high-need, low-resource schools and other district schools.





Public Impact's independent analysis of available student data suggests that the Partnership model has positively affected student achievement and other outcomes.

To examine student achievement in Partnership schools, Public Impact looked at how each school's "percentile rank"—an indication of how a school compares to other schools statewide in a given subject—has changed during its time in the Partnership. For example, a school with a percentile rank of 30 in math is higher than only 30 percent of the state's schools; 70 percent of schools have higher math performance. A *change* in a school's percentile rank indicates whether it is gaining or losing ground relative to other schools, and how much ground it is gaining or losing.

By this analysis, 95 percent of Partnership schools have improved their statewide percentile rank in English Language Arts (ELA), and nearly 90 percent of schools have improved their ranking in math since joining the Partnership network. In other words, the overwhelming majority of Partnership schools have moved ahead of other California schools in student achievement between the time they joined the Partnership and 2017, the last year for which student assessment data is available.

### *The overwhelming majority of Partnership schools have moved ahead of other California schools in student achievement between the time they joined the Partnership and 2017.*

In both ELA and in math, 63 percent of Partnership schools improved their ranking by 10 percentile points or more (that is, they moved ahead of 1,000 schools); 47 percent of schools improved by 20 or more percentile points (moving ahead of 2,000 or more schools). All of the current Partnership high schools have made double-digit gains in statewide percentile ranking since joining the Partnership. Two of the highest-climbing schools—Math, Science, Technology Magnet Academy at Roosevelt High School and Mendez High School—have improved by more than 60 percentile rankings in math since becoming Partnership schools.

Moreover, Partnership high schools are showing strong and sustained improvements in four-year cohort graduation and college acceptance rates. Since 2010, Partnership high schools have generally increased graduation rates at a more rapid pace than the district. And since the Partnership began tracking college acceptances

in 2015, all high schools in its network have increased their percentages of seniors accepted into four-year colleges.

Nonacademic indicators also suggest the Partnership is having an impact. The truancy rate in Partnership schools overall declined by more than 50 percent between 2011–12 and 2014–15, outpacing L.A. Unified, which experienced a 25 percent decline. Suspension rates in Partnership schools overall also declined between 2011–12 and 2014–15, generally outpacing the declines in L.A. Unified and schools statewide.

The Partnership's efforts to address systemic issues that present barriers to success for all students, particularly those in high-need schools, have also yielded significant successes. L.A. Unified has expanded district-wide many Partnership pilot programs, including universal gifted testing, school report cards, and a personalized, online high school credit recovery program. In 2017–18, the district will expand the Partnership's signature parent engagement and education program, Parent College, to other district schools. Two class-action lawsuits focused on addressing inequities that arise when a lack of resources results in students in high-need schools having fewer excellent teachers or less learning time led to additional critical teacher supports for Partnership schools and other similarly situated L.A. Unified schools. The Partnership's unique status and position relative to the district helps draw the district's attention to these issues and enhances the Partnership's ability to advocate for and effect change on a large scale.



**A**fter working in schools and with the district for 11 years, the Partnership has acquired wisdom and insights about turning around district schools and achieving system change.

**LESSON #1 The formula for success pivots on three critical elements:** 1) *Focus on the critical levers for sustainable and scalable change: teachers, leaders, and parents.* Research indicates that these people are the most important influences on student outcomes. Without a strong focus on building their capacity to effect change in schools, other interventions will not live up to their promise. 2) *Differentiate supports according to school needs.* A one-size-fits-all approach that does not recognize and build on the particular assets of an individual school or address its specific resource challenges will not achieve meaningful and sustainable change. 3) *Forge a true collaborative partnership with the district.* The Partnership's approach stands apart from that of charter operators but also contrasts with more traditional district partnerships, in which outside organizations provide support while the district runs the show. The Partnership assumes real authority in its schools. But by working within the district, it sets the stage for leveraging district resources to effect systemic changes with much greater potential impact.

**LESSON #2 Philanthropy can be leveraged effectively.** School turnaround efforts have spent significant public and private funds and often with little to show for the investment. In contrast to many school improvement initiatives, however, the Partnership has seen a favorable return on investment. For about \$650 per student<sup>8</sup> the Partnership's experience in its first 10 years in schools demonstrates that effective school management coupled with efficient leveraging of philanthropic funds and community resources to supplement district resources can yield meaningful success.

**LESSON #3 Leverage community resources.** With finite public and private resources, neither the Partnership nor the district can provide all the supports that schools with a majority high-need student population need to improve student outcomes. Limited resources matched against great needs that extend past classroom walls require outside partners. Organizations such as the Partnership, which can help connect high-need schools to community partners and facilitate relationship building, maximize the limited resources available to high-need schools.

LESSON #4 **Start small and scale up with focus.** The Partnership initially took on 10 schools at once. Recognizing that the huge start-up was a “threat to early results,” the Partnership’s founding leaders advise other school management organizations to scale up gradually. In line with decades of research about successful turnarounds,<sup>9</sup> they also caution against trying to address every school challenge and improvement issue.

LESSON #5 **Build strong and deep relationships across the district.** District partners allied around common goals and interests have helped the Partnership weather district leadership and organizational changes, and helped facilitate faster changes for schools than legal action may have produced, with little loss of political capital. In the Partnership’s experience, a strong relationship with the district is predicated on having deep knowledge of the district and its capacities, to understand what needs to change, how change can occur, and who in the district can help realize change. Given the bureaucracy inherent to any large urban district, cultivating deep relationships with staff up and down the district’s administrative structure is also critical.

As the Partnership forges ahead into its second decade, its immediate goals include having every child in its network of schools read at grade level and doubling proficiency rates in ELA and math; increasing the number of Partnership seniors accepted into four-year colleges; and championing the most equitable policies that will help close the ELA achievement gap for the 50 highest-need district schools. To do so, the Partnership will further refine its model while remaining focused on the three key levers of leaders, teachers, and parent and community engagement, and continuing to work with the district to address the policies and practices that impede student success systemwide.

As of this writing, the Partnership's primary benefactors, Richard and Melanie Lundquist, are committed to making another large gift to support the Partnership's mission. With philanthropic support for the Partnership looking strong, the Partnership is committed to achieving long-term sustainability, not only for the benefit of students in its network, but in L.A. Unified and other districts where leaders are seeking new approaches to transforming schools and addressing systemic inequities.



## Endnotes

1. In 2017 end-of year state assessments, only 40 percent of students overall met or exceeded standards in English language arts (ELA); 60 percent failed to meet the state's ELA standards. California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Smarter Balanced Assessment test results*. Retrieved from <http://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/sb2017/default>

2. In 2017 end-of year state assessments, only 30 percent of students overall met or exceeded standards in math; 70 percent failed to meet the state's math standards. California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Smarter Balanced Assessment test results*. Retrieved from <http://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/sb2017/default>

3. Only 4 percent of English language learners met or exceeded standards in ELA and 5 percent in math on 2016 end-of-year state assessments. California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Smarter Balanced Assessment test results*. Retrieved from <http://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/sb2017/default>

4. Among economically disadvantaged students, 34 percent met or exceeded standards in ELA and 24 percent in math. California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Smarter Balanced Assessment test results*. Retrieved from <http://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/sb2017/default>

5. Boghossian, N. (2006, June 21). LAUSD's graduation rate: 44%. *Los Angeles Daily News*. Retrieved from <https://www.alipac.us/f12/lausds-graduation-rate-44%25-29265/>

6. This reporting is based on Public Impact's analysis of student and school data for schools in the Partnership network. "Significant" improvement is defined here as improvement in statewide percentile ranking in state performance by 10 or more levels, based on Public Impact's analysis of student and school data for schools in the Partnership network.

7. Based on Public Impact's analysis of graduation rates at schools in the Partnership network. See CDE Department of Accountability, Dataquest, Graduation Rates, retrieved from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

8. This estimate is based on the Partnership's expenditures and student enrollment in the 2015–16 school year.

9. Hassel, B. C., & Hassel, E. A. (2009, winter). The big U-turn: How to bring schools from the brink of doom to stellar success. *Education Next*, 9(1). Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/the-big-uturn/>



