

SCHOOLS THAT CAN*

Validation Report

NEIGHBORHOOD ACADEMY

PITTSBURGH, PA

Jay Gottlieb, Ph.D.

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***Formerly Bill Traylor Institute for Inner City Education**

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INTRODUCTION

Schools That Can (STC) is a national network of unaffiliated safe, high achieving schools located in inner cities and serving a largely poor minority population of students. Neighborhood Academy, Pittsburgh, PA, has been identified as one of these high-performing schools. As more schools are identified, they are included in the network subject to a validation of their education program. The network aims to celebrate, support and promote these schools' accomplishments. The entire list of criteria for inclusion into the network appears in Appendix A at the rear of this document.

After a school has been identified and initially vetted by Schools That Can representatives the actual validation begins. The validation process for each school is consistent, subject to variations in teachers' and school's schedules and parent availability. Typically the process includes the following steps:

- Two to three weeks before a site visit, administrators are mailed a one-page parent survey to be completed by a representative 15%-20% sample of parents and a one-page survey to be completed by all teachers. These survey forms are collected at the time of the site visit.
- Each site visit typically lasts for an entire school day, or close to that amount of time. Depending upon scheduling considerations, the visit begins with a brief meeting with the school administrator, who provides the visitor with the schedule for the day as well as any published or printed information about the school. Classes are then visited for about 20-30 minutes each when instruction is occurring. Usually five to six classes are visited. Classroom management styles, techniques for behavior management and nature and style of instruction are observed (e.g., whole class, small group, lecturing, modeling, active or passive learning requirements)) Time is allotted to interview teachers individually, although because of time constraints teachers are occasionally interviewed in small groups. Often but not always, a sample of curriculum materials is collected. Parents are interviewed either at the beginning or end of the visit, depending upon availability, and these interviews focus on their satisfaction with the program and why they sent their children to the school as opposed to their local neighborhood school.
- Academic performance data for the schools are then downloaded from the city or State website. Comparable data for neighboring schools, the entire city, and the state are also downloaded for comparison purposes. Occasionally, some schools

do not participate in the state assessment process either because the state does not allow them to participate or because they opt not to. These schools invariably administer alternative standardized test data, and these data are used and compared to national norms the particular assessment device and/or are evaluated for performance over time.

- An exit interview is usually held with the school leader at the end of the day to provide him/her with a brief and general overview of the results.
- Information from the classroom observations, interviews and academic performance are then analyzed and a report is produced within two weeks of the visit.

This report provides results of observations, interviews of parents, administrators, and teachers, and a review and analysis of academic achievement data to support the inclusion of Neighborhood Academy in the STC network.

Neighborhood Academy, Pittsburgh

History and Mission. Neighborhood Academy began as a summer school pilot program in the early 1990's and opened its doors as a year-round day school on September 12, 2001, to its first class of eighth and ninth graders. In its literature, the Neighborhood Academy describes itself as a faith-based, college preparatory high school serving low-income youth. The school's mission is to break the cycle of generational poverty by preparing low-income youth for higher education. The educational activities provided by the Neighborhood Academy are designed to provide its students with the academic, emotional, cultural, and psychological support necessary for them to become educated. The school day begins at 8:00 A.M. and concludes at 7:30 P. M. with mandatory evening study hours and dinner.

The cost of educating each student at the Neighborhood Academy is \$24,000, including support of the facilities. However, tuition is based on family income, that is, a sliding scale. Currently, if a family's income is less than \$25,000 annually the tuition charge is \$50/month. To put this into perspective, the Academy literature indicates that about three-fourths of the families earn less than \$30,000 annually.

Students complete an application form and are interviewed prior to admission. During the past three years, between three-fifths and two-thirds of applicants were admitted.

Students. Neighborhood Academy began the current school year enrolling 68 students, in grades 8 through 12 inclusive. Almost all students, 98%, are African-American. 70% of the students live in families with a single parent, and 56% are eligible for free/reduced price lunch programs. About one-fourth of the students live with a non-parent, and 90% live in a household with a recent history of drug/alcohol abuse. Three-fourths have a recent family history of domestic violence. A tabular presentation of student demographics appears in Table 12.

Table 12
Demographics for Neighborhood Academy

Students enrolled	68
Pre K	0
Lower school (K-5)	0
Middle school (6-8)	68
Percent Caucasian	2
Percent African American	98
Percent Hispanic	0
Percent Asian	0
Percent eligible for free/reduced price lunch	56
Percent mobility rate	48
Percent special education	0
Attendance rate	96%

Teachers. Neighborhood Academy has a total staff of 24, 12 of whom are members of the teaching staff. The student-teacher ratio is 10:1. According to the validation study questionnaire that the school completed, 12% of the teachers are certified. During SY 2004-2005, there were 14 teachers on staff and two of them left the school. The current school leader has been in his position for five years.

Parent satisfaction. Survey responses were scored from 12 parents to the questionnaire described earlier in the narrative. In Table 13, a tabulation of parent responses to the question, “*Overall, this school provides a sound education for its students,*” appears.

Table 13
Parental Satisfaction (in Percent)

Overall, this school provides a sound education for its students

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
67	33	0	0	0

Although the number of responses from parents was small, a few less than we requested, the data still demonstrate convincingly that the parents of students at Neighborhood Academy are satisfied with the education their children are receiving.

Curriculum. The school curriculum is built around the belief that the Neighborhood Academy is a place where students come to build “habits of the mind” that will lead to a life filled with meaningful work, healthy relationships and self-respect. This belief guides to core values of the school, which include attendance, or internalizing daily diligence, discipline, meaning civility, manners, responsibility to and for self, accountability, daily preparation, and responsibility. Stated differently, students are expected to take responsibility for their decisions and their behavior, internalize impulse control, and resolve conflicts with peers and adults in an appropriate manner. A dress code for young men and women helps shape the core value of civility. The school is preparing its students to lead productive, meaningful lives.

The academic portion of the curriculum includes math, from basic math for eighth graders through algebra for 10th graders; science, including physical science in 8th grade, earth science in 9th grade, and biology for 10th grade; English/Reading and Writing, in which various genres of literature are studied, such as short stories, poetry, and novels. The curriculum emphasizes development of skills in reading comprehension, writing, grammar and spelling. The social studies curriculum covers civics in 8th grade, and world cultures in 9th and 10th grades. A history research paper for 11th grade has recently been added as a requirement.

The school’s culture of participation is reinforced by its after school programming, which includes athletics, such as golf, basketball, cross country, track, and most recently, volleyball; cultural literacy, where students are exposed to the world of art, music, dance and theater,; and student life, which involve an expanded program of student clubs.

The overall curriculum, including the academic component has generated positive growth as indicated by the data in Table 14. Neighborhood Academy does not participate in the Pennsylvania state assessments and instead administers the Stanford Nine, a nationally normed assessment device. The data are presented in grade equivalent (g. e.) scores.

Table 14
Neighborhood Academy (Stanford Nine)

	2003-2004	2004-2005
Reading	7.7 g. e.	8.6 g. e.
Math	6.3 g. e.	7.7 g. e.

Additional detail regarding academic performance appears in the school's annual report, and includes:

--From 2004-2005 report, 11 students (out of 14) had an average SAT 9 math score of 6.3 grade equivalent scores in Spring 2004 and a 7.7 g. e. mean in Spring of 2005, for a gain of 1.4 grade equivalent years. The same 11 students had an average reading score of 7.7 in Spring 2004 and 8.6 in Spring 2005.

--Math 2.7 grade level improvement and from 15th to 36th %ile within 2001-2002 in 9th grade

--From 8th to 9th grade in reading grade equivalent gains between 3.2 and 4.2 years. In two years from beginning of 8th grade to end of 9th grade, students made 3 to 4 year gains.

--From 2003-2004 report, three students tested over a 2.5 year interim reported grade level gains of 2.6 grade levels in reading and 3.8 in math.

--Nine students tested over a 2.5 year interval gained an average of .5 years in reading and 1.5 in math.

-- 100% of graduates of the most recent class attended college.

Recommendations

The site visit occurred on the last day of school when the academic program was winding down and a typical classroom situation could not be observed. Consequently, I cannot offer suggestions regarding classroom instruction. My only observation is that the professional development opportunities for the teachers, as briefly described to me by a couple of teachers, appear to be somewhat meager and could be beefed up, probably with worthwhile results. The primary concern was that some of the teachers are not as well versed in issues related to cultural diversity as they should be and that there was limited opportunity to get that experience prior to working with the students.

The administration may also wish to establish a more reliable and valid data base to track student performance. The current reports do not present a systematic approach to performance outcomes and it is difficult to compare performance across school years.

APPENDIX A

CRITERIA FOR MEMBERSHIP

SCHOOLS THAT CAN member schools provide families and students from economically disadvantaged urban areas with an education based on the following criteria:

- 1. Located in the inner-city and primarily serving an economically disadvantaged population of students that are representative of its community, with at least 50% eligible for free lunch**
- 2. Striving to achieve superior levels of academic performance as measured by objective assessments and outcomes**
- 3. Emphasizing character based education**
- 4. Providing a safe, disruption-free, non discriminatory environment, where teachers can teach and children can learn**
- 5. Valued by parents and actively engaged within their communities**
- 6. Characterized by dedicated and effective leadership**
- 7. Attaining a high level of sustainability**
- 8. Willing to share “best practices” and assist other STC network schools.**

APPENDIX B

Biography

Jay Gottlieb is a professor of educational psychology in the Department of Teaching and Learning at New York University. He received his doctorate in 1972 from Yeshiva University in New York City and has spent the past thirty years conducting teaching and conducting research and evaluations in urban schools. His research focuses on the education of at-risk students and students with disabilities. Dr. Gottlieb has served as a special education expert for federal and state court cases involving special education, studied special education in the Oslo, Norway public schools, and participated in the drafting of reports to re-organize special and remedial education in the New York City schools. He has published 90 articles in various professional sources and has been the principal investigator of about two dozen research grants and contracts as well as director of several training grants, including one to train doctoral level researchers in applied research. Dr. Gottlieb was a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, a member of numerous other professional organizations, and at various points in his career, served on the editorial boards of half dozen professional journals. Dr. Gottlieb also served two terms as and elected public school trustee in his community

Summary and Conclusions

Each of the seven schools reviewed were characterized by the development of students who were taught to take responsibility for their behavior and to value academics. All schools succeeded in these goals, some perhaps more than others. These goals were accomplished because teachers worked hard, had high expectations for their students, and because most parents supported the school's mission. The basic value of all schools was that students had to learn to become productive citizens, to develop their basic character, to take responsibility for their actions and to make the right choices in their lives. Once these values are instilled in the students they can focus on the next major goals of schooling: producing literate students. These schools demonstrate that under the right conditions, poor students from the inner-city, students who have largely have not been well served in their local public schools, are able to attain high academic standards.

Biography

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APPENDIX A

SCHOOLS THAT CAN CRITERIA FOR MEMBERSHIP

2005

A Bill Traylor School provides families and students from economically disadvantaged urban areas with an education based on the following criteria:

- 9. Located in inner-city and primarily serving an economically disadvantaged population of students that are representative of its community**
- 10. Striving to achieve superior levels of academic performance as measured by objective assessments and outcomes**
- 11. Emphasizing character based education**
- 12. Providing a safe, disruption-free, non discriminatory environment, where teachers can teach and children can learn**
- 13. Valued by parents and actively engaged within their communities**
- 14. Characterized by dedicated and effective leadership**
- 15. Attaining a high level of sustainability**
- 16. Willing to share “best practices” and assist other schools.**

APPENDIX B

SCHOOLS THAT CAN **(Formerly Bill Traylor Institute for Inner City Education)**

VALIDATON BOARD

BACKGROUND

Started in 1998 as the Bill Traylor Foundation, an informal network of four high performing schools, the organization has evolved into SCHOOLS THAT CAN (STC), a nationwide network of fifteen schools that have agreed to meet STC's membership criteria. Up to fifteen new schools will be added during each of the next two years. All schools serve children living the inner city of large metropolitan areas who have few alternatives to receive a quality education. STC is a 501(c) 3 charitable organization.

Based on the shared vision of our board and the network of our outstanding schools, we recognize that, in spite of many challenges, we are in a position to make a difference in helping to improve inner city education.

STC is committed to continue to expand the number of member schools, document that each school meets STC Criteria for Membership, identify why each school has achieved its high level of success (identify best practices), and share the results with other STC schools as well as with public schools. Each member school will be validated approximately every three years. The Validation Study also will be used to assess potential new member schools. Member schools will use the report internally to identify areas for improvement as well for fund raising (most member schools have identified fund raising as their biggest challenge). Each three years STC and the school will be able to track improvements in academic performance as highlighted by the previous report.

VALIDATON BOARD

Member schools want to be validated by professional, objective educators: an independent assessment of their current position, including the identification of areas to be improved. To this end, STC has created an independent Validation Board (VB), consisting of professional educators from across the country. The VB is responsible for the Validation Study process and the format and contents of the reports.

Last fall, STC engaged Dr. Jay Gottlieb professor of Education at NYU, to evaluate the first six schools. The Perkins Malo Hunter Foundation, has agreed to fund 15 school evaluations during 2005-2006 and in each of the next two years, is funding the project.
Validation Board Composition

- ◆ Validation Board consists of leading educators representing a cross section of the country who serve for a period of three years.

- ◆ Four representative heads of schools serve on the Validation Board as advisors to provide input from member schools.

University Educators

West Coast: Dr. Dr. Richard Fliegel, Department of Education, University of Southern California, Los Angeles

Mid-West: Dr. Patty Horsch, Professor, Erikson Institute – Graduate School in Child Development, Chicago

East Coast

Dr. Jay Gottlieb, ex-officio, Professor of Educational Psychology, New York University, New York

Coordinator and STC Advisor: Seymour Fliegel, President, Gilder Senior Fellow, Center for Educational Innovation (CEI), New York

VB Head of School Representatives:

Mike Piscal, Head of School, View Park Preparatory Accelerated Charter School, Los Angeles, West Coast

Cheryl Collins, Holy Family Lutheran School, Chicago, Mid-west

Spencer Blasdale, Director, Academy of the Pacific Rim, Boston, East Coast

AB Whitfield, Co-Principal and Chief Operating Officer, Trey Whitfield School, Brooklyn, NY Metro area

March 6, 2006

