



Our History

Bobby and I both taught at struggling district schools, one a high school in New Orleans' Ninth Ward and the other a middle school in Jefferson Parish, LA. Each of us had some success creating a small classroom environment of committed learners, kids who believed in their abilities to succeed beyond expectations and really wanted to learn. But ultimately, we each felt we had failed, because most of our kids were not destined for a better future when they left our classrooms.

Fundamentally, we knew that our kids wanted to learn. We knew that the excitement that comes from understanding new information is a shared human trait, whether we are black, brown, or white, rich or poor. We found that, if you sit down with a student who really trusts you, he will tell you that he wants a safe and orderly place where he can learn, and that he loves that feeling of understanding, for the first time, a complex idea. We also saw that there were many factors inhibiting that innate desire to learn and succeed.

In the second school I worked at, as a teacher and instructional coach, I found that the factors attacking students' desire to learn existed even in a loving, structured environment. Most of our students complied - they did what we told them to do. But they were not surrounded by a culture that built intrinsic motivation or helped their desire to learn flourish. They weren't experiencing success through deep thinking about rigorous content, and when they left structured spaces and caring adults behind, we knew they would slip. Many of the most successful urban charter schools in America have recently been recognizing the same problem. Their kids are learning faster and doing much better on state tests than kids down the street - but when it comes to college completion, to deep conceptual understanding, and to true global competitiveness, a massive achievement gap remains.

At the core, we believe not only that all kids can learn but also that all kids want to learn. Unlocking this 'want-to' takes the advancements in urban education to a meaningful place, a place where all of our children, and especially those who need it the most, are on the path to graduate from college and to pursue their dreams.

Since founding this organization in 2011, Bobby and I have not changed our vision for urban schools, but we've learned a lot from missteps along the way. We believed that creating a new norm of positive learning behaviors was incredibly important, but we tried to get there through developing students' own leadership skills. We learned that teachers could do this in their classrooms more efficiently and effectively than we could from outside of their classrooms – and that teachers who were highly skilled were already doing this.

We also believed that teachers were the most important variable in the equation driving student success – but we didn't understand that a single-minded focus, and an intensive commitment of time, would be essential to making sure each classroom had a great teacher. Finally, we misread skill gaps (our own and others') as knowledge gaps – we thought that by just doing more teacher-coaching, or by persuading school leaders to do more teacher-coaching, we could have the transformative impact we wanted to have. After some small successes and a continuing frustration with the slow pace of change, we were facing this question: how can we help our schools improve the execution of teacher development and also increase the time allotted to teacher-coaching, not a little bit, but dramatically? It seems there is one answer to both parts of the question: if a school leader is great at developing teachers, and she experiences transformational success in the building because of her own teacher-coaching skills, she will allot more time to coaching teachers and to growing the coaching skills and capacity within her and her team. We have now completed a shift that began three years ago, from directly training student leaders to helping principals dramatically accelerate teacher development. And by stepping back and working with teachers and principals, we are now seeing more and more of that desire to learn on display in the classrooms at our partner schools.