

Supply-Side Reform on the Ground

Matt Candler
New Schools for New Orleans

matt@nsno.org

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I am about to enter my tenth year as a school starter, and I hope to share in this chapter some of the lessons I have learned about life on the supply-side of school reform. I will share lessons learned from my time at the KIPP Foundation, where I led the new school development team, and in New York and New Orleans, where I have helped build two new organizations dedicated to improving the quality of charter schooling city-wide. All of these lessons are about a commitment to quality – in existing schools and in schools that are still in the pipeline. I will try to draw lessons that might inform new supply-side reform efforts elsewhere.

Lessons from KIPP

Soon after his new foundation director, Scott Hamilton, explained the potential he saw in KIPP, Don Fisher, the founder of Gap, invested \$15 million to take KIPP to scale – from two schools in Houston and New York to as many as they could without sacrificing quality. The earliest versions of the business plan had KIPP’s national footprint at well over 100 schools within less than five years. In fact, the growth came more slowly. The first year, Dave and Mike found three educators who displayed leadership potential and alignment with the five pillars that expressed what was common to their schools: high expectations, choice and commitment, more time, power to lead, and a focus on results.

The first three Fisher Fellows would become KIPP school leaders a year later, and they went straight to work learning leadership basics from Nancy Euske at the University of California—Berkeley’s business school and from Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin’s schools, where they shadowed the two founders and watched KIPP in action. Someone had to write the charters, build the boards, talk to the superintendents, and drive around looking for buildings, and nobody

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thought that was a good use of time for future school leaders. Their priority was learning the model and getting “KIPPnotized.” Mike was running his own school in Texas, setting up the new foundation team based in San Francisco and meeting with the people who were calling in orders for more KIPP schools. Before those first three schools even opened their doors, it became clear that Mike would need some help. He asked Jill Joplin, a Teach for America alum based in Atlanta, to help him with the start-up effort, and they proceeded to submit applications and put things in place for the three new schools.

Meanwhile, a couple of my friends in the charter world had heard of the new KIPP expansion. One sent me a copy of the business plan. One told me I should get in touch with Mike. When I first sat down with him at a Holiday Inn in Raleigh, North Carolina, I walked Mike through what I had been doing for three years with individual mom-n-pop schools in North Carolina. Each fall, I would reach out to founding teams that I thought had potential and offer to coach them through the charter application process. If they made it through the application successfully, I would go on board as a consultant to help them build out the board, hire a principal, find a building, and get through the first few months of school. Once the dust settled, usually in November, I could start again with the next round of applicants. Given the state’s distaste for for-profit management companies, business was good. I had worked with about ten schools so far but questioned the impact I was having on kids since leaving the classroom a few years earlier. I picked clients as wisely as I could, but some were more interested in trying out a neat idea than building schools like KIPP, which I had seen earlier that year in New York.

Trailblazers – Clearing a Path for School Leaders

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Mike hired me a few weeks later as the vice president of school development in charge of three functions – facilities, recruiting new principals, and trailblazing. Mike coined the “trailblazer” term that first year to describe what he and Jill were doing for the three new recruits. They would blaze a trail through the brush of a school start-up so fellows could stay focused on learning the KIPP model. To get to a quicker pace than constructing three schools per year, we built a team of trailblazers based in San Francisco, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, and New York. Blazers picked the cities that schools would open in, garnered political support, evaluated and engaged critics, built boards of directors, looked for buildings, and told the story of KIPP while school leaders were busy learning how to run schools.

In interviews, we would drill trailblazer candidates for at least three traits: First, each needed to display enough tenacity to get multiple school deals going in different states. Second, each needed the humility to do whatever it took to set each future school leader up for success. Third, and most importantly, each needed the capacity to read people and read communities. We had calls coming in from across the country, both from folks who wanted to become KIPP principals and from community members asking us to start schools in their town. Training for the team centered on picking apart requests from different cities to determine which deals were best and which might collapse at the last minute.

Funding, Facilities, and Freedom – the three F’s – were the deliverables required of every trailblazer in any new school deal. It was easy to train blazers on how to diagnose the fiscal and facilities landscape in a city, but teaching folks to have a good read on the Freedom we needed was harder. We were looking for congruence, especially between those folks who wanted us in

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town and those who were going to be our bosses – the state and district staffers or board members who authorized and oversaw charter schools. Our first all-blazer road trip illustrates how important diagnosing freedom was to KIPP.

In late 2001, the blazers all flew into Atlanta, and we headed south out of town in my SUV, rigged with the CB radio and multiple cell phones that made my road warrior consulting gig in North Carolina bearable. Our destination was Thomasville, Georgia, a small city I knew better as an early morning coffee and biscuit stop on the way to dove hunts with my dad and brother than as a bastion of school reform. But other folks, including Governor Roy Barnes, had made a compelling case to the superintendent, and we were an item on the Thomasville School Board agenda that afternoon.

In Georgia, the local board had to approve any new school for it to receive full funding, and we wanted a unanimous affirmation of KIPP from the board. We walked the superintendent through our presentation, and he explained that we might meet some resistance in the school board. It was the first public presentation for Marni Mohr, the newest member of our team, and we wanted her to be prepared. We took off for lunch, and to get her psyched up, we found the best barbeque joint in Thomasville and splurged. It was day one, and I was as concerned with expressing my well-developed barbeque palate as I was in showing strong support to our newest teammate. We learned at lunch that we had until almost 5:00pm to wait for the board, and instead of giving some speech about leadership, I figured we should blow off some steam. We bought five tickets to *Legally Blonde* and loaded up on Twizzlers and Gummy Bears.

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At 5:00pm, coming off our sugar highs but empowered by Reese Witherspoons’s graduation speech at the end of the movie, we filed into the board room behind Marni. She delivered a flawless explanation of KIPP and explained what the Foundation would do to support a new KIPP school in Thomasville. She finished up and asked for questions. She got nothing. Not a question. Not a single comment. No “thank you,” no “no thank you.” Marni would summarize the situation later: “Crickets. I could hear crickets chirping outside.”

We did not open a school in Thomasville, but we learned our first great lesson in alignment. The authorizer – in this case the district itself – had little interest in KIPP, much less in new schools as a vehicle for change in its system. Even though others really wanted KIPP there, their passionate calls were not enough. If leadership in a city really wanted KIPP to be a part of their reform agenda, they had to invest in making sure the people who would actually approve schools - the authorizers and those who run the system day-to-day – were on the same page and valued new high-quality school creation. That was not the case in Thomasville.

After the Green Light

In the ten cities from which we did get a green-light that year, the three F’s were in place, and we had solid school leaders in the Fellowship. We kept an eye on start-up progress using Gantt charts that tracked progress on each deal. I had learned how to build them when I worked on the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games. For each sports venue that we managed, we would list the tasks that had to be completed and when. We would then build a giant map of miniature timelines – one for each task – that provided an easy way to see the whole project and discuss dependencies between tasks. There were 406 items on our 2002 Gantt charter template. We

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handed each founder a four foot long Gantt chart rolled up in scroll fashion with a bow tied around it early in the Fellowship. This was partly to scare them about how hard starting a school was and partly to assure them that we had a handle on what it took. Too often, charter-centric reformers focus on getting deals done and then wait until later in the process to find the school leader. For us the Gantt did not happen without the school leader already in place. Starting a good school takes a year of planning – and that is after you find your principal. For any significant supply-side strategy to succeed, it must prioritize getting the school leader on the ground at least a year ahead of time.

Having the three F's in place is critical to any great supply-side effort. The most critical F is Freedom. Supply-side reformers must prove to the best operators (whether they are KIPP or individual educators) that their future bosses – the people who authorize schools – have a good sense of what strong schools look like and will not only let them open but keep weaker schools from muddying the reform effort. They should assure school founders that they will not face death by a thousand paper cuts at the hands of bureaucrats who do not really feel responsible for setting them up for success.

New York: The Three F's Securely in Place

On March 27, 2004, in his second year as Mayor Bloomberg's new chancellor of schools, Joel Klein committed his profound support of charter schools at the State Charter Association Conference: "I am an unalloyed supporter of charter schools. From the day I arrived as Chancellor I made clear that charters are a critical leveraging force in public school reform." Few large city superintendents had made such a commitment, but it made sense that he would

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support charters. The guy who busted Microsoft for stifling competition in software was bound to be a champion of accountable schools who had to prove their worth in a more competitive market. He understood that for supply-side charter reform to work in New York, the best operators would need to be convinced that the right environmental conditions were in place.

Joel was not the first person to champion charters in the city, and it would be important for him to align his effort with others in the charter game. In fact, after five years of investing in charter schools, New York's most active charter supporters were showing signs of fatigue. With dozens of schools now underway, the donors were starting to lose a grip on which schools were the strongest targets for further investment.

The Robin Hood Foundation had been building a brilliant philanthropic brand in the city, attracting powerful fund managers and celebrities to join their effort to eradicate poverty in the city. Charter schools like KIPP in the South Bronx made sense to them since they were helping kids get to college and break the cycle of poverty. Julian Robertson, the founder of the Tiger Fund and one of the most successful hedge fund managers in history, had hired a smart new director who was convinced that charter schools held great promise for their new philanthropy. Joe Reich, an extremely successful entrepreneur and banker, and his wife Carol, a developmental psychologist, had been working since 1989 to start a new public school in Brooklyn's District 14, and eventually succeeded after years of skirmishes. They wanted to see more charters in the city but did not think it should be as hard as it was for them in the 1990s.

Joel did more than any authorizer in the country to ensure that the three F's were in place. He

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promised existing facilities at a dollar a year, carved out a quarter-billion dollars of the capital budget for new charter buildings, allocated funding from his own budget to offset start-up and special education costs incurred by charters, and promised freedom from red tape by authorizing schools directly out of the brand-new Office of New Schools, which reported straight to him. Joel thought there was more to do. He saw the need for an independent entity to advocate from outside the system. His Office of New Schools was thinly staffed intentionally, and he wanted a strong presence outside his administration to keep pressure on the bureaucracy he was trying to dismantle. This was a key feature of the New York supply-side strategy: tight alignment with the current Klein administration to get things going quickly but also independence that mitigated the risk of future administrations that might be less committed than Joel.

The funders loved the idea and got together with Joel to start the New York City Center for Charter School Excellence. Tiger and Robertson committed \$15 million each, and Joe and Carol Reich committed \$10 million. Another \$1 million from the Clark Foundation brought the total to \$41 million. Joel and the CEO of New Schools, Kristen Kane, each had a seat on the board, along with each of the three lead investors and a few other respected leaders in the city, including Geoff Canada, the founder of Harlem Children's Zone, who was starting a network of charter schools. The size of the financial commitment was certainly important, but the alignment between Joel as authorizer and external advocates with financial and political resources was far more significant. The partnership unclogged the supply pipeline in New York. After our first year of operation, we had more than 90 groups expressing interest in new schools.

The first time I heard about the Center was when Phoebe Boyer, Robertson's foundation director,

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pitched the concept at a national conference a couple of months after Joel spoke to the charters in March. I was intrigued. As we built KIPP schools around the nation, we struggled with the impact we were making in each city. Should we hunker down in one town or keep going to new cities when we sniffed out good conditions? New York presented a real chance to show quality at scale in lots of great schools, and since KIPP was there already, I felt at home. Before KIPP I had actually worked for New York State as an independent reviewer of new applications. The State University of New York's Charter Schools Institute (CSI) was established as an independent entity by the charter law in 1998 and was dedicated to charter school authorizing and oversight. Its director, James Merriman, was committed to keeping the bar for new CSI schools high. In 2004, eleven of sixteen charters serving fourth graders outperformed their district averages, as well as five of six serving eighth graders. Most of these schools were authorized by CSI.

Launching the Center

I joined the Center as Chief Operating Officer in October of 2004, less than a month after Paula Gavin signed on as CEO. Paula was a New York native and former CEO of the YMCA. She had the street credentials with CEO's and political power brokers in the city that allowed her to spread the message of the new charter effort. At the current pace, we would be hitting the statewide cap of 100 charter schools in less than two years, and Paula's network would be instrumental in building support for a change in the charter law to lift the cap. I would build a team of educators committed to supporting charter schools in the city, especially those in the pipeline. Paula knew the political landscape, and I knew what good schools looked like. We agreed it would be critical to get out to the schools as soon as possible. Since the money had

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been raised months earlier, schools were starting to get suspicious about where the money was going.

Paula and I used those visits to get to know one another, to get a lay of the land, and to explain to schools what we were going to do with the money. We heard more than once the following question: “Why don’t you just split the \$40 million up between the schools that are running now and be done with it?” We broke the bad news to them directly. Most of our money – at least fifty percent – would be spent on schools that did not even exist yet. We would spend another ten to twenty percent on advocacy and informing elected officials and influential leaders about charter schools. Only about a third of our money would be spent on existing schools, and much of it would be in the form of advice and coaching, not cash. The investors refused to subsidize operations in schools and wanted us to focus on quality. Those early visits were critical for the Center, as we established up front that we were about quality in charters, not about charters alone. We would not protect weak schools. In fact, we pleaded for school leaders to self-police and put pressure on one another. This proactive stance was a departure from most traditional charter support efforts, and one that we worked hard to communicate.

In fact, many folks thought the Center was an old-school charter school resource center on steroids. Charter resource centers were typically led by policy folks involved in the early stages of passing charter laws. Their primary goal was to get schools approved, helping applicants navigate the charter approval process. If they did anything for schools beyond this, it was typically called technical assistance and centered on interpreting charter law and state policy.

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I admit that I was obsessed with destroying the perception of being a resource center. I had good friends running resource centers, but I was not a very good policy wonk. I was a school starter. I wanted to build a team of seasoned and accomplished educators – folks who would have credibility with our client base in both existing and pipeline schools. Our first goal was to get control of the pipeline and put KIPP-like practices in place, both in terms of picking quality operators and getting them ready for opening day. We would then move on to the existing school portfolio and see what we could do there.

Managing the Quality of the Pipeline

We had two goals in our pipeline work: be attractive enough to all applicants to have them want to work with us, and steer only the very best of that group to the authorizer. Twice annually, we hosted free sessions for the public in which we explained the basics of charter schools, taking up most of the time explaining how hard we thought starting a school really was. Leading this effort was Jessica Nauiokas. Jessica had recently completed New Leaders for New Schools’s residency-based principal training and had earlier learned the workings of the New York system as a corps member in Teach for America. She had a tremendous eye for school leadership capacity. She was able to gracefully steer passionate school founders either toward submitting applications if she thought they had potential or delaying if they were not ready.

After the free sessions, Jessica would get to work with those still interested in pursuing the new school idea. She would ask them to fill out a simple technical assistance application, our first screening device. If approved, they would be eligible for \$10,000 worth of free start-up advice. This was not a grant, but it was free help provided by hired consultants working on loan to us.

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We checked in monthly with our team of consultants and asked them to steer the most promising toward applying to the authorizer for a school and to the Center for a larger, more intensive \$35,000 planning grant. We asked each consultant to mine less promising groups for individual talent that might be ready someday, looking for good jobs in existing schools where they might be exposed to strong leaders. We also studied who was most influential in each founding group who was not an educator. We would look for other roles for them, either as volunteers, or as board members at other schools.

We were willing to lose the \$35,000 investment in a school if during that grant period we learned a school was not up to the challenge. This was a simple cost-benefit calculation for us – \$35,000 was a small price to pay to keep a bad school off the street. We did not do it often, but it only took one or two to send a message to applicants that we were critical investors. For example, in 2005, a handful of groups were working with Imagine Schools, a management company considering expansion in New York City. Weeks before applications were due, they got nervous about the lack of control that they had under the state law and pulled out of the city, leaving multiple applicants in the lurch. We met with each group and advised delay. One group refused and moved forward with an application, claiming enough political juice to get the deal done regardless. We agreed to disagree but let the group know that we would share our perspective with authorizers if they asked us.

Against our advice, the school was approved anyway, and they did not spend much time with us after they opened. Their school is doing okay, but it is not a standout. There was real tension between Joel's desire to open lots of schools and our push for quality. This tension continues to

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define the supply-side work in New York, and I think it is very healthy. Today Joel's team stays in close touch with the Center on the pipeline each year and coordinates closely on applicant readiness. The independence we have keeps their authorizing honest and rigorous. Their demand for new schools keeps us focused on developing capacity where we see potential in the pipeline.

Critical Friends for Schools

Once schools made it past the formal application process, they applied for \$50,000 Post-Approval Start-Up Grants and got to know the rest of our team. Jessica introduced each group to two operational and two instructional teammates and got to work on the next pipeline cycle. The Director of School Operational Excellence (we still hate that title) was Laura Smith, a fellow alum from business school who was fresh out of a Broad Fellowship stint with innovative superintendent Alan Bersin, with whom she helped fifteen small San Diego high schools open in one year. Florence Adu, another Teach for America alum, had worked for the New York City Economic Development Corporation and had a strong base in facilities development in the city. She, like Laura, was able to engage schools quickly given the universal need to find affordable buildings, whether in Joel's school buildings or elsewhere.

On the instructional side, I looked for educators who had been at the center of strong charter schools. If we were to build any real trust with schools, this part of the team had to earn the right to talk straight with school leaders. Heather Caudill, a founding teacher at the KIPP WAYS Academy in Atlanta, had moved to New York to teach and knew what a start-up looked like. Glenn Liebeck was second in charge at what I thought was Boston's best high school, MATCH.

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He was splitting his time between teaching science and serving as dean while Charlie Sposato, the school's principal, observed instruction. Glenn had a relentless need to call fellow school leaders out for setting low expectations for their kids. He best embodied what I was looking for in a critical friend for schools. He would spend some time watching instruction with school leaders and go right at them with crisp details from the classroom where teachers had let kids off the hook and missed chances to deepen student understanding of a topic. This kind of dialogue disarmed school leaders and proved we could talk shop.

The post-approval grants were designed to deliver the same kind of support to schools that blazers used to provide at KIPP. We asked schools to use part of their start-up grant to hire operations directors early in the year. This paid off, as our grant recipients entered the school year with strong financial and operational controls. These schools were able to avoid the most common threats to charter school failure – poor internal controls – and focus from day one on school culture and instruction.

Extremely Critical Friendship

Once we had the start-up process relatively organized, we started to discuss how to engage existing schools. The most important factor in choosing schools was buy-in. After one of those early visits with Paula to the ReadNet Charter School in the South Bronx, the school's founder walked us out the door, down the street, down the steps to the subway, through the turnstiles, and onto the number six train, begging us for advice all the way to the southern tip of Manhattan. The visit revealed a school struggling financially due to under-enrollment and a bad facilities deal. Instruction was poorly aligned due to a weakly developed reading curriculum. The school

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was approaching its five year renewal mark, and we were deeply concerned that it might not pass the test. I started meeting frequently with the board and urged them to voluntarily withdraw their charter renewal petition. Deciding on their own to pull the application and take responsibility for closing the school instead of waiting for the state to decide at the end of the year would be gutsy, but it would be in the best interest of kids and families. In a high-profile closure a few years prior, the school did little to help families relocate because they were fighting the closure case. We needed to prove that weak schools could be held accountable without causing such pain for families and kids.

Instead of waiting for the state to decide their fate, the board voted unanimously in November to pull its renewal application voluntarily. We provided pro bono counsel for dissolution and other legal efforts, and hosted less than 24 hours after the board decision the first of many parent information sessions designed to support each family in their search for a new school. We met with all teachers to finalize their certification papers and help them find jobs. We reached out to charter schools nearby and to regional placement officers – encouraged by Joel to work with us – to provide families with waivers that most did not know that they could apply for and notices of new openings in other schools. The board showed great leadership admitting that, while they may have been able to fight for the school’s life, it did not have to be that way. They had not closed the achievement gap for their kids nor had they established a sound footing for the future, and they were willing to own that failure.

This board’s self-policing was a huge win for the movement in New York. It gave the first proof-point to authorizers, the press, and the public that charter schools could self-police quality

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and that the accountability of schools need not translate into chaos for families or teachers in schools that need to close. It also sent a strong message to other schools that we were serious about doing something about quality in the portfolio.

Replicate and Share Practice from the Best Schools

The other end of the quality spectrum was easier to diagnose. Some of the highest performers in the city, led by KIPP, were already working on replicating. We did what we could to support those efforts, subsidizing the recruitment of new principals through a creative deal with New Leaders for New Schools that allowed trainees and charter schools to get to know one another and arrange residencies in schools that they would later replicate. We bundled planning and start-up grants and got them to replicating schools early. We provided air cover for charter groups like Achievement First with state bureaucrats who worried that they were carpetbaggers who did not understand New York.

For existing high-performers, we focused on building trust and asking for help in leveraging their best practices to benefit other schools. For example, we worked with schools in the Uncommon Schools network and KIPP to pilot rigorous interim assessment practices that we could someday share with others. We tapped leading teachers in each school and taught them how to align curriculum with state tests. They in turn taught other teachers to build custom interim assessments to help predict year-end performance early enough to do something about it in the classroom. This was a higher order instructional strategy that less stable schools would not be able to execute well, but which the stronger schools saw as valuable to them and more efficiently done in a group of trusted peer schools.

Managing the Rest of the Portfolio

Our strategies for the extreme ends of the quality spectrum made sense – close the worst and replicate the best. We had no idea what to do with the rest of the schools. We studied 990 returns and school budgets volunteered to us by schools. We created a weighted, running average of academic achievement and compared it to the district and city averages over the last two years of operation. We then plotted schools from best to worst along each axis. Deeper analysis on some schools helped us refine the y-axis based on multi-day school reviews, in-person interviews, and day-to-day interactions with school leaders.

Figure I:

(Insert: CandlerFinalMap)

Figure I shows our first complete picture of the portfolio. The scatter plot of schools spread loosely from the lower left to the upper right, with a few noticeable outliers. We did not have scores for every school but guessed for those that had not posted yet (those are depicted in short lists in each sector of the map without a corresponding dot). We defined our work with schools based on where they lived on the map. For the schools on the far left, we considered whether closure was possible. For others on the left, we would focus on diagnosis and then advocate for boards to replace weak leaders. For those on the right, we looked for replication candidates and best practices that we could capture and share with others. We were not sure about the middle and threw a variety of strategies at these schools.

Diagnosing Failing Schools

We were very direct and hard-hitting in our dialogue with the weakest schools, at least for those that wanted our advice. For example, Geoff Canada's first school, Promise Academy, posted weak scores in year one (represented by the HCZ Promise dot in the left third of the scatter plot). Geoff asked for help, and we assembled a team of Center staff and outsiders to do a multi-day review of the school. Soon thereafter, Glenn was spending every Wednesday morning there, coaching the middle school director on culture. Halfway through the year, he was convinced she could not turn it around and advised Geoff to look for a new division director. We helped connect him with a successful principal we knew in New Jersey and helped Geoff recruit him to take over the middle division where scores were weakest. The school's dot has since moved to the right; in 2007, Promise sixth graders scored three points above the district average in English Language Arts and ten points higher in Math.

Formal school reviews raised the level of urgency for school boards and principals, but even with the professionals we hired, we had to coach them on making their school reviews more actionable and critical. The growing demand for school reviewers makes those who do it for a living a little less willing to upset current clients and risk losing future business. That was unfortunate, and supply-side reformers who want to use external review mechanisms should demand detailed and timely advice that forces a response from school leaders.

Dealing with the Middle of the Pack

What we did not do well in New York was deal with the schools in the middle. I think

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everybody managing large portfolios of schools, including KIPP, struggles with this. We spent way too much time giving feedback to schools that had not bought into our role as a critical friend. Maybe this was precisely because their performance was just mediocre. They did not have to worry about closure since there were other schools far worse off than them. Some also felt the high profile support of the foundations and buzz around schools like Achievement First were simply out of reach. I still struggle with what to do in these schools, and think passive incentives that lay out clear guidelines for monetary rewards for school improvement might have more impact in these schools than coaching.

Raising the Bar between Average and Great

Another mistake we made in New York was defining as too low what excellent performance should be. There were two perspectives within the team for where to set the bar between moderate and great. One camp advocated for setting the bar much higher than ten percent above the district trend, setting it closer to the suburban school district average to reflect where schools needed to be to close the socio-economic achievement gap. We settled in the other camp, placing the upper bound at ten percent above the city/district average. This mirrored the lower bound for moderate schools of ten percent below the city/district average.

I think this was a mistake. We did not describe to anyone what we thought excellent schools really looked like or which traits they had in common. In fact, the schools on the far right of the map share some distinct features, which when articulated, can paint a pretty clear picture of what achievement gap-closing schools might look like. Supply-side proponents must clarify what excellence entails by demanding basic structural components like: extended school time; year-

long, residency based training for leaders; wise use of interim data to modify instruction; and slow growth that allows improved cultures to develop. They also must restrict financial rewards and other incentives like the capacity to grow through replication to schools that demonstrate the highest levels of academic achievement on par with suburban school performance. Table I reveals what I think, based on lessons learned in New York, a proactive supply-side portfolio strategy could look like:

Table I:

	Lowest Performers	Moderate Performers	High Performers
Definition	<i>Consistently ten or more points lower than district/city</i>	<i>Less than high performing suburban districts</i>	<i>As strong as suburban districts where achievement gap does not really exist</i>
12 month strategy	Focus on clear diagnosis, Support leadership change	Offer incentives for rapid academic improvements (without cheating or teaching to the test)	Help build bench strength; Replicate as soon as possible; Capture best practices
Long-term strategy	Work with authorizer to speed closure	Invest in leadership change	Replicate

Getting lots of charters opened is far less important than making sure the first waves of schools

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in a supply-side reform effort are of the highest quality. Slow quality will not guarantee broad support, but it holds more promise than a mad rush to mediocrity. In fact, with the cap now lifted, the Center is back at it with both Joel's office and others. The tension to rush many schools into existence is at odds with a relentless commitment to excellence. Figuring out the right number of new schools to open always presents a challenge, and the Center's independent voice for quality is more relevant now than ever.

Taking New York to New Orleans

After more than two years of work in New York, it seemed like we were making a dent in the quality of charter schools in the city. Charters continued to outperform traditional public schools, and some of the practices we had fine-tuned in school reviews and interim assessments were starting to inform city-wide efforts.

A few days after the levees broke in New Orleans, the Louisiana state school board effort to improve schools there – underway since 2003 – took a more aggressive turn. Amid rumors that the local board was contemplating postponing the entire 2005 school year, the state took over every New Orleans school that was below the state average (107 of 125 schools). Suddenly a state bureaucracy designed to oversee local districts was in charge of actually running eighty percent of a 60,000 student system. When the state considered charter schooling as the primary mechanism for getting this done, the once-in-a-lifetime chance to prove supply-side reform as viable was compelling. So was the potential to drag down the rest of the charter movement under conditions that even the strongest advocate for change would not want replicated elsewhere. “Wow, what an opportunity.” “Oh man, if they screw this up, we are all toast.” This

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was the nature of conversations charter folks were having after hearing about the state takeover.

I felt the call to New Orleans when Sarah Usdin, the former New Orleans executive director of both Teach for America and The New Teacher Project, came to visit the Center and see what Louisiana could learn from our work. She seemed to understand the complexity of rebuilding the city while focusing relentlessly on quality. State board members and staff in charge of the takeover were asking for help and seemed capable of the same alignment that Joel demonstrated in New York. It would take work, but there was potential. I felt that my skill set as a school starter was something that could be put to use in New Orleans, and after sharing everything we had done at the Center, including some of the mistakes and lessons learned, I found myself convinced that I needed to be there. I joined Sarah as the CEO of New Schools for New Orleans in October of 2006, a few months after she filed for incorporation.

Our mission at New Schools for New Orleans is threefold: attracting and preparing talent to teach and lead, launching and supporting open-enrollment public charter schools and advocating for accountable and sustainable high-quality public schools. Everything I have covered about launching and supporting schools in New York is being applied in New Orleans, so I will not repeat any of that. The most important distinction between the Big Apple and the Big Easy is, ironically, human capital. It is much easier in the Big Apple. And if this volume is to inform future supply side efforts, this is a critical topic to cover. When it comes to human capital, most cities hold more in common with New Orleans than New York when it comes to attracting talent.

Building a Talent Pool in New Orleans

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It was much easier to get people to move to (if they were not there already) and stay in New York than it is in post-Katrina New Orleans. Even with the recent positioning of post-storm New Orleans as the place for young do-gooders to jump into the fray, the extremely low expectations placed on educators for decades is profound. Sarah has built a decade of experience in the human capital business in New Orleans and was right to make this our primary area of investment. It will make or break us.

To build capacity in the teacher and principal pipeline, we have solicited the support of many partners, such as The New Teacher Project (TNTP) and New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS). Both are used to working with large school districts as clients where the relationship is more “turn-key.” As a nontraditional partner, we do two things that make their models work in New Orleans. We provide a one-stop shop for their engagement with charter schools. In New Orleans, where charters are half the market, that lack of access is a deal-breaker. Being willing to strike a deal with charters also incentivizes the district – in this case the state-sponsored Recovery School District – to get on board. We lower fixed costs for each provider, giving free office space and subsidizing a portion of staff costs to make it hard for the district to say “no.” This makes the pool of new human capital larger and increases competition for talent, injecting oxygen into a very stagnant labor market.

As we move into the next round of negotiating with each partner, we will propose incentives to motivate placement in the strongest schools, aligning their effort with our school quality investments. Along with Teach for America, which is expanding its effort into the city, these providers will attract and train almost half of all the teachers and principals in the city over the

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next three years. This injection of new talent into the market is not sustainable forever, so we are studying the potential of starting a new local teacher development organization, either in partnership with existing degree-granting institutions or as an entirely new institution similar to Teacher You, a partnership between KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools in New York.

The Need for Strong Leaders

Charter school leadership is not just about school principals. With half of the schools in the city operating as charters, the sudden need for strong board members is acute. Boards, not school leaders, have legal accountability for school performance. In addition to training existing boards and those still in the start-up process, we actively recruit and orient future board members from the New Orleans community to the role of charter school board member. We host “speed-dating” sessions and city-wide orientations designed to match potential board members with schools. Having a steady and capable pipeline of potential board members at our disposal provides tremendous leverage in our existing school improvement work. Too often, we have avoided the brutal facts that many charter board members do not take seriously their commitment to the authorizer to deliver high achievement to the citizens who are funding their school.

As Joel did in New York, we are courting great operators to come to town. I do not think we will get much traction with most large operators since their growth is best done near their home base, but we do think that there are other ways to attract great school founders. Taking another page from New York, we are partnering with Building Excellent Schools (BES) to start new schools. This Boston-based nonprofit manages a residency-based training program that exposes

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promising school leaders to highly-effective schools in the Northeast. We front the costs of the program, help recruit board members, business managers and teachers for their schools, provide office and meeting space for each founder, and share training components with our own School Incubation Program.

Our School Incubation Program, a 12 to 14 month residency-based training program that prepares promising educators to open their own charter schools is designed to recruit talent from the rest of the country and to train bench players in the strongest local schools to speed replication efforts. Glenn is now running a similar program in New York to build bench strength, but ours is, for now, positioned to train more new founders than successors in existing schools. Growing local school leaders is a riskier strategy that may not be required in New York, but it is likely to be necessary in any new supply-side reform effort located elsewhere.

Fight to Fight the Fight

I hope that some of the lessons we have learned at KIPP and in New York can help inform new supply-side reform efforts elsewhere. We are doing our best to leverage those lessons in New Orleans. Supply-side reform architects in other cities must understand what quality operators are looking for in the landscape. At KIPP, we made sure that the three F's – Facilities, Funding, and Freedom – were in place. Starting truly excellent schools is difficult work, and the most talented operators, whether they are KIPPsters or starting their own schools, need to know that they will not have to, in Dave Levin's words, "fight to fight the fight." A commitment to new schools in a city must be shared by political and business leaders, philanthropists, and, most critically, authorizers.

Supply-side reform architects should be clear about what they mean by excellence. I think excellence means closing the socio-economic gap. Any effort that aims lower is likely to die a slow death of regression to slightly above the mean. Managing the quality of schools in the pipeline by proactively maximizing gap-closing schools and finding elegant exits for less capable founders is critical work best done in tandem between authorizers and independent organizations. Replicating the best and closing the worst schools, also best done via collaboration between authorizers and independent groups, can have a profound effect on supply-side reform and must be backed by community leadership.

In addition, unless we are trying to reform a very, very sexy place to live, entrepreneurs need to attract and then develop the raw material for great schools – talented educators, board members, and operational leaders. A combination of national and local tactics can yield results here, but the effort must highlight needs in truly excellent gap-closing schools that will attract the best educators. Supply-side reform holds great promise for children stuck in our weakest public school systems. If done by a well-coordinated group of leaders committed to closing the gap in new schools, it can change the lives not only of the children in those schools, but also catalyze reform in the larger system for every child in that city.