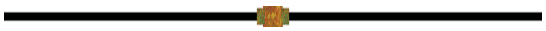
Rescuing Avon Avenue School: BRICK Avon Academy's First Year

By Gordon MacInnes

A Policy Roundtable Report of the Chad School Foundation, Inc.

The author and the Foundation are grateful to Dominique D. Lee and Daniel Gohl for contributing vital information toward the completion of this work.

This report also benefited greatly from research assistance and support provided by Leah Z. Owens, Dr. Peijia Zha, and Dorothy J. Knauer. Finally, the Foundation could not have produced this document without the generous support of John Henry and the SOTI company (Strategic Outsourcing Technologies, Inc.).



Established in 1991, The Chad School Foundation, Inc. is an education policy and advocacy organization seeking to improve conditions in public school systems serving disadvantaged children. Through the commissioning of research and white papers, annual convening of key policy and decision makers, and promotion of evidence-based practices, the Foundation champions promising efforts to create high-quality public schools. Chad also assists in providing opportunities to alter the life chances of low-income, yet aspiring students through a limited number of academic scholarships.

Preface

The Chad School Foundation is honored to support BRICK: Building Responsible Intelligent Creative Kids. In January 2011, Chad's former Executive Director, Reginald Lewis, commissioned the Foundation's first ever policy roundtable report on BRICK's turnaround of Avon Avenue School in Newark, New Jersey.

This report, Rescuing Avon Avenue School: BRICK Avon Academy's First Year, focuses on Avon Avenue's transition from a traditional public school under the direct management of Newark's local school district, Newark Public Schools (NPS) to its emergence as Brick Avon Academy. When The Chad School Foundation first published this report in November 2011, Reginald Lewis, Chad's Executive Director, offered the following:

> *"BRICK: Building Responsible Intelligent Creative Kids, is the story of teachers who receive authorization from the Newark Public Schools to manage the former Avon Avenue School in the South Ward of Newark, New Jersey, one of the state's lowest-performing schools. This report closely examines the areas that factored into the negotiations between the founding teachers of BRICK and the Newark Public Schools to focus on a high-poverty school with a persistent record of low achievement. The BRICK story also includes the magnitude of the challenges faced during the planning and initial implementation phases, including the inheritance of a faculty largely unaware of the cultural and structural changes envisioned for Avon."*

As the current Executive of The Chad School Foundation, I echo the sentiments of gratitude to the Report's author, Gordon MacInnes, for writing this important report on a school turnaround effort that derives early lessons that benefit education reforms in Newark and throughout the nation.

As an education policy and advocacy foundation, The Chad School Foundation is committed to always honor our long-held work to support increasing student achievement in Newark, throughout New Jersey, and across the nation. This extraordinary organization serves as a critical voice in Newark community. The Chad School Foundation benefits from a rich history in the city of Newark. This rich history which began in the late 1960's with a clarion call to establish the former Chad schools has positioned The Chad School Foundation as a recognized convener of efforts to improve education outcomes for students of color. With a near 50 year legacy of calling the community to action, educating children in schools, initiating and supporting advocacy efforts to improve public schools, and now awarding scholarships to expand college access, The Chad School Foundation unquestionably demonstrates its ability to impact education in Newark.

We also stand ready to convene leaders in the community through Chad's policy roundtables focused on relevant education issues that affect our community.

Eric E. Stevenson
Executive Director
The Chad School Foundation

Table of Contents

This is a story about six Teach for America alumni who form a nonprofit corporation and negotiate with the Newark Public Schools (NPS) to take over management of a "persistently failing school" in Newark's South Ward. Called "Building Responsible Intelligent Creative Kids," henceforth BRICK, was founded on the belief that "teachers are the core to turning around chronically failing schools." BRICK and NPS agreed that their first mutual effort would be the Avon Avenue School, one of New Jersey's lowest performing public schools.

NPS laid down a big bet on BRICK in a dramatic departure from the usual top-down, bureaucratized approach of urban school districts. BRICK had no track record. Its founder-director was 25 years old; his colleagues not much older. Only one of six had any school management experience (five years as a vice-principal of Chancellor Avenue). The agreement is for five years. It is a bet on energy, intensity of effort, resolve, and confidence in teachers and students. The educational prospects of 600 children have been entrusted to BRICK.

This is the story of what happened when Avon Avenue reopened as BRICK Avon Academy in September 2010.

Before delving into the details of this complicated and interesting experiment, it is important to provide the setting.

SECTION ONE: The Context

BRICK Avon fits the national effort to salvage failed high-poverty public schools. Because this is not the usual story, its impact spreads beyond Newark and New Jersey.

The school turnaround industry is fragmented, unproven, and growing. For two decades, advocates have pushed the idea that the lessons of private sector turnarounds could be successfully applied to failed schools. Edison Schools Corporation was the most visible with performance contracts to takeover high-poverty schools in Philadelphia and other cities. After two decades, it is pretty clear that schools in poor neighborhoods do no better under for-profit Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) than they
Do under the district schools they replace.

A small, but growing, segment of the turnaround industry is the teacher-run school. Los Angeles turned 29 schools over to a teacher-inspired organization in 2010; Boston and Detroit are experimenting on a much smaller scale. And, now, Newark via BRICK.

The industry gained by passage of the 2009 federal stimulus act that included $3.5 billion to turnaround the bottom-performing five percent of schools. To no one's surprise, all the schools eligible for School Improvement Grants ("SIG") are "high poverty" schools. SIGs are just the latest effort to transform this subgroup of schools that has proven resistant to decades of commission reports, reforms, and broken promises in the 46 years since Title I was enacted to solve their problems.

Given a half-century of failure, the United States Department of Education (USED) acted with surprising precision and certainty in setting the terms for "transforming" America's toughest schools. Instead of inviting proposals from universities, think tanks, and non-profit and for-profit corporations—the customary federal approach to knotty problems—USED set down four "models" to govern the distribution of billions of dollars. It is this national context that makes the BRICK experience on Avon Avenue important well beyond Newark.

USED determined that there are four ways to save under-performing failed schools. They are:

1. The "close" model shuts down the failed school and scatters its students to other nearby schools, including charters.
2. The "restart" model shuts down the failed school but reopens it under contract to an EMO or a "charter management organization" (CMO). The new operator has a free hand with personnel, curriculum, and disciplinary policies, but must accept any student from the failed school who seeks admission.
3. The "turnaround" model must replace the principal and at least half the faculty, change the curriculum, intensify teacher training, and address social, emotional, and community issues;
4. The "transformation" model replaces the principal, evaluates teachers to reward the most effective and dismiss the least effective, and increases instructional time.

BRICK proposed to "restart" with a K-2 school that would add one grade each year for six years; it ended up with a "turnaround" K-8 school.

The USED agent for implementing SIGs is the NJ Department of Education (NJDOE). Following USED guidelines, it reviewed three years of state test results to identify those schools consistently in the bottom five percent. The twenty lowest performing schools qualified as "Tier 1" in the SIG parlance. Of these, 65% were in either Camden or Newark, three of them in the South Ward, including Avon Avenue.

NJDOE used the SIG awards to mandate *district-wide* implementation of the "Common Core Curriculum" by 2014, district-designed interim assessments, a teacher evaluation system based 50% on student performance, and a dropout identification and intervention program.

A review of Tier 1 schools accentuates the challenge facing BRICK at Avon Avenue School. The schools on this unenviable list share two characteristics that create the context for BAA.

New Jersey's very lowest-performing schools are not just "high-poverty," but are "poverty-only" schools and located in very poor neighborhoods.

Deep poverty is a fact, not an excuse. Eighty percent of all Tier I students are eligible for free lunches (v. 27.4% statewide); 5.8 percent for reduced-priced meals. The three South Ward Tier I schools are even poorer with an 88.8 percent free lunch average (Avon Avenue: 90.3 percent). An alarming 22 percent of all Tier I students are classified with at least one disability (the statewide average is about 16 percent). Not surprisingly, students in poor neighborhoods with low home ownership rates move around much more. The average annual mobility rate of 25 percent is two and one-half times the state average.

The quick profile, then, of BRICK Avon Academy is a student body where everyone is poor—very poor—and where one quarter of September's students will be gone next September.

Back in 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson pushed for the Elementary and Secondary Act (the largest source of federal k-12 funding); he argued the problem was that poor schools needed more money to close the achievement gap. In the interim, while the gap has narrowed, it is still gaping. Since 1965, the education industry has repeated LBJ's error of concentrating on the wrong problem.

The achievement gap persists primarily because of the failure to address frontally its foundational cause—concentrated poverty.

Today's reformers explain the gap as a function of teachers holding back, requiring, therefore, new standards of accountability; or, as a paucity of parental choices. Earlier "reforms" included centralization, decentralization, technology, leadership training, Afro-centric curricula, more rigorous curricula, etc. By ignoring the effects of concentrated poverty, we aim at the wrong targets. Consider the best evidence we have about the worst-performing schools:

First, there is no dispute about the hard-wired relationship of poverty and academic underperformance. All reliable assessments report the same discouraging curve

connecting socioeconomic status and achievement. The 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress ("NAEP"), the gold standard for assessing performance, depicts a gap in reading of 12 scale points between students eligible for free and reduced lunch. The gap between reduced-lunch eligible and those ineligible is another 16 points.

Other tests like the SAT or the NJ ASK mirror these results. *Family income and the educational level of parents, when combined, explain more of the gap in performance between poor and middle-class students than any other factor*. That connection was first documented in the 1966 "Coleman Report" on equal educational opportunity and proven on millions of test results since. The second most powerful variable is the socioeconomic status of one's classmates. *Together parent status and classmate explain somewhere between sixty and eighty percent of the variance in student achievement*.

NJASK results illustrate the importance of classmates. For example, students who are eligible for free or reduced lunches in school districts categorized "DE" in New Jersey's District Factor Group, (e.g., Bloomfield, Lyndhurst, Woodbridge, groupings based on socio-economic status) consistently perform better than students who are not eligible for any assistance but attend "A" districts like Elizabeth or Newark.

Second, "poor-only" schools magnify the effects of poverty.

Growing up in a poor family is a disadvantage, but is no surefire predictor of severe academic underachievement (confirmed by the NJASK results above). The best research available confirms that children in poor families—wherever they live—are *less* likely to grow up in a home where parents read regularly themselves, encourage their children to read, provide children's books, read to their children regularly, and converse thoughtfully in complete sentences.

Children who grow up in a rich print environment are much more likely to begin kindergarten ready to read. They know their letters and can sound them out, have larger vocabularies, have heard more stories, and are familiar with books. These family characteristics are important, but not conclusive, in predicting how well and quickly a child learns to read. There is a chance for preschools and schools to intervene to alter the too-frequent trajectory of kids from poor families who never learn to read strongly.

However, the best evidence is also clear that the disadvantages of growing up in a poor family are compounded if a child grows up in a poor neighborhood and attends a school with *only other poor children*. If the school is one with a *legacy of failure*, the family and neighborhood problems are further compounded. Finally, if a child grows up poor in a non-English speaking family in a poor neighborhood with failing schools, the likelihood of failure is even greater.

Except for the factor of home language being other than English, the above is a depressingly accurate description of the Avon Avenue School and its neighborhood.

The line from a home without books or bedtime reading to kindergarten without knowing one's letters to not reading for comprehension by third grade to falling further behind by 8th grade to

not graduating high school is direct and powerful. But it is neither a guarantee nor an excuse, since schools can break that line. If they start early.

Third, we know a lot about schools with only poor children that perform better than would be predicted by their students' poverty.

In 1978 Ron Edmonds laid out the characteristics of effective schools. In the intervening forty years, additional research has amplified and shaped his findings. There is nothing surprising or controversial on his list. Its simplicity masks the difficulty of implementing its principles and practices.

Here is what Edmonds described about schools that educated poor kids well:

- A principal who is the instructional leader, who knows how to help teachers diagnose and correct pedagogical (teaching) problems;
- A clear mission focused on academic performance;
- A safe, orderly environment that is hospitable to kids, teachers, and parents;
- High expectations by all teachers for all students;
- Mastery of reading, writing and math skills
- Frequent assessments to adjust instruction;
- Close engagement of parents; and,
- Avoidance of pitfalls by staying current on research about effective practices.

These conclusions are so obvious and so intuitive that it is almost embarrassing to take the reader's time with them. Just as concentrated poverty is ignored so, too, are these essential habits too often ignored.

SECTION TWO: BRICK negotiates a deal with the Newark Public Schools

The idea of teacher-led schools is not a new one, but it is rare in practice.

Many small schools in the early twentieth century were led by a "Head Teacher." Over time, the term evolved into "Principal Teacher" and, finally, "Principal."

BRICK Avon Academy is one of the first schools in the New York metro area that has teachers at the helm (the United Federation of Teachers started a Brooklyn charter school in 2005). With everyone on the lookout for break-the-mold school models, the idea of teacher-run schools is gaining as the number of teacher-run schools grows.

BRICK is the creation of six Newark teachers who believe that schools led by teachers and focused on teaching can perform better than traditional schools.

It is fair to suggest that no profession is asked to perform a more difficult job than educators who lead, and teach in, a poverty-only school in a poor neighborhood. This is the "most difficult job" the founders of BRICK sought.

All six were drawn to Newark for a two-year commitment by Teach for America. Unlike half their TFA colleagues, they stayed for a third year and beyond. They were united in wanting to stay with the Newark Public Schools.

They were brought together by Dominique Lee, a third year social studies teacher at Malcolm X Shabazz High School teacher, and began by meeting after work and on weekends to discuss how to create a school culture that empowers teachers as instructional leaders. They maintained their teaching and administrative jobs and graduate school studies. They were united in the belief that the top-down, centralized and bureaucratized district school model would not work. Over time, their conversations led to some critical preliminary conclusions:

1. They would form a non-profit organization to act as an EMO to take over failing schools;
2. They chose not to pursue the charter school alternative, seeking a neighborhood district school because that is where the overwhelming majority of poor students remain;
3. They would test their assumptions by taking over one of the lowest-performing schools in one of the poorest neighborhoods.
4. Given the large deficits in knowledge and skills of their own students in the upper grades, they would concentrate initially on the K-2 grades. They concluded that they needed to start early to produce students who read and write on grade level by third grade;
5. They believed that instructional time had to be increased beyond what NPS permits; and,
6. They hoped to attract colleague teachers who shared their core beliefs, passion, and energy.

Lee is the director, fund-raiser, negotiator, and founder of BRICK. A graduate of the University of Michigan from Pontiac, he serves as the operations leader of BAA. His BRICK teammates:

Charity Haygood graduated from Colorado College and came to Newark in 1994, and taught for ten years at Bragaw Avenue School,(another K-8 feeder school to Shabazz.) After receiving her MA from St. Peters College, she became a vice-principal at Chancellor Avenue School, also in the South Ward. With five years experience there, she became the Principal-Leader of BAA.

Chris Perpich, also a University of Michigan graduate, is the BAA vice-principal for the K-5 grades, having earned an administrator's certificate via an MA at Teachers College, Columbia. He taught at Branch Brook School in the North Ward, a higher performing district school, for three years.

Bernadette Scott, a graduate of William Paterson University, was a reporter for the *Asbury Park Press* before joining the faculty at Shabazz High School in 2006 teaching English.

Princess Williams grew up in the South Ward, attended NYU, and returned to Newark in 2006 to teach at the Alexander School Annex.

Mindy Weidman grew up in Lancaster, PA, attended Millersville State, received her MA at the University of Connecticut before teaching social studies at Weequahic High School starting in 2006.

BRICK was incorporated by *pro bono* lawyers of Lowenstein Sandler, who also assisted in formalizing the negotiations with NPS. Over its 18 months of planning, BRICK received grants from the Victoria Foundation and the Office of Innovation and Change of NPS that permitted the BRICK team to visit exemplary schools in the metropolitan area and across the country.

The BRICK founders captured the goals and practices Edmonds emphasized with two modifications. First, BRICK asserts that teachers, and administrators who were recently teachers, are best prepared to create the culture and conditions to improve learning in poverty-only schools. Second, BRICK gives greater emphasis to continuous and tailored professional development. BRICK's goals and principles follow:

- High expectations and a challenging, rigorous curriculum. BRICK's agreement with NPS calls for the adoption in 2011-12 of the International Baccalaureate's rigorous standards and practices;
- A team approach that emphasizes respect, collegiality, and professionalism. The BRICK team includes the instructional leader (the principal), a data leader, a culture and discipline leader, and an operations leader to handle the non-instructional responsibilities like budgeting and facility maintenance;
- An emphasis on tailored or "differentiated" professional development that is continuous and addresses each teacher's needs. Time is built into the schedule to permit teachers

to learn from one another at grade level exchanges and across grade level. Professional development is a habit, not an event.

- A school plan that is based on the needs and station of students and teachers as they are inherited. BAA is not another top-down "model" that is packaged for instant "scalability" by some magical transfer. Typical reforms impose their model from the top and then blame the failure to achieve promised results on imperfect implementation. Not so at BAA; and,
- A school that is safe, orderly, and efficiently managed so that instructional professionals are free to concentrate on the complexities of teaching lots of poor children

BRICK's aspirations, timing, and approach fit well with the goals of the NPS superintendent Clifford Janey.

In his relatively brief tenure, Superintendent Janey laid out an ambitious, fairly realistic strategic plan that focused on improving NPS's academic performance. The plan gave special attention to the bottom-performing schools, like Avon Avenue. Wisely, no single approach was mandated; it fit nicely with BRICK's ambitions.

> *Engaging effective nonprofit school leadership organizations as a partner*. There are nonprofit organizations. . . that specialize in helping schools turn around. . . . They . . .may become a school manager, guiding instruction and, sometimes, operations. Often, these organizations bring particular specialties such as implementing small learning communities or introducing more rigor into teaching and learning. We will carefully consider the choice of any external partner and, as with all choices, consult the community in the decision-making process. (Emphasis in original)

The initial negotiations between BRICK and NPS were encouraging.

The BRICK team approached NPS in August 2009 with a short Power Point presentation to the top leadership of NPS of its proposal to take over a South Ward school. Superintendent Clifford Janey was impressed enough to ask Dan Gohl, the director of innovation, to work with BRICK.

The compatibility of the NPS strategic plan with BRICK's proposal did not guarantee a smooth deal. There was little doubt about the NPS 's desire to find new partners to manage the district's low-performing schools. Gohl saw his role to nurture and guide BRICK through the bureaucratic maze of the NPS and to help mold its proposal. The BRICK team met weekly in his office.

Negotiations centered on BRICK's desire to start with a K-2 school and add one grade each year until a K-8 evolved.

BRICK's idea was simple and sensible in that it reflected the most effective approach for poverty-only schools: intensive literacy instruction aimed at producing third graders that read

and write at grade level. This is the principle behind the most successful districts in the country that serve concentrations of poor kids (e.g. Montgomery County, MD and Union City, NJ).

If third graders are strong readers, they have a fighting chance to master the increasingly challenging content beginning in 4th grade. Otherwise, the middle grades are a frustrating slog of never catching up, but falling further behind.

Between September 2009 and April 2010, BRICK was encouraged to pursue the K-2 model. Dan Gohl even thought that BRICK should apply, with NPS, for the first round of School Improvement Grants because it represented such a fresh and bold approach. With a June deadline for applications, however, there was not enough time to complete the negotiations and prepare the paperwork.

Gohl worked with Lee, the NPS General Counsel and BRICK's *pro bono* attorneys to mold an Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The outline of the NPS-BRICK agreement was compelling: BRICK would be granted optimal flexibility within the constraints of state law and regulation and any collective bargaining contracts. NPS would retain ultimate responsibility and authority, but BRICK was to be given maximum leeway in selecting its own leadership, controlling the school's budget, shaping the staffing ("floor plan"), revising the curriculum, and developing its own professional development practices. BRICK was free to pursue funding beyond its NPS budget with the "advice and consent" of NPS.

NPS agreed to handle BAA's finances, personnel processing, payroll and benefits, maintain and improve the Avon facility, handle food service, transportation, security, and absorb all costs associated with achieving IB status.

The Superintendent's April surprise.

The MOU was ready for signature in April 2010 even though the takeover school was not specified, but Superintendent Janey insisted on one major change: BRICK had to take over a K-8 school or no school. Janey opposed the idea of trying to run two schools in the same building with different principals as would be required with the K-2 "restart." He felt there were sound management and logistical reasons for insisting that the whole school be taken on.

Given the choice of deferring or canceling its takeover, the BRICK team accepted the K-8 offer.

For the BRICK team, Janey's decision was both a surprise and a challenge. BRICK's intriguing idea was to start with 200 curious, eager-to-learn K-2 students to produce strongly literate third graders. The goal was to avoid "fade out," where schools that produce strong results in the primary grades see performance flatten or decline in the middle grades.

As discussed below, the difference between a K-2 first year and a K-8 first year was much more than the addition of 400 students. For starters, BRICK would have to wrestle with an

educational challenge with no proven answers: how to teach bigger, sassier, and more complicated middle grade students who read two or more years below grade level.

In the parlance of poker, the BRICK founders were "all in." Their zeal to demonstrate the efficacy of teacher power and to do it in a district (not charter) school in Newark, New Jersey trumped the disappointment of not starting small and young.

Interestingly, the radical experiment at Avon Avenue School proceeded without a formal BRICK-NPS agreement. The MOU was not signed until March 2011. In effect, BRICK proceeded on the word of Dan Gohl and the good faith of the General Counsel, Lisa Pollack.

As negotiations with NPS progressed, Dominique Lee made the rounds with senior NPS officials to establish working relationships. After the provisional MOU was initialed, he began to pose operational questions about the curriculum, instructional materials and supplies, building status (Did rooms need repainting?), technology and database, and personnel procedures. Also, he met in June with a senior Newark Teachers Union (NTU) official, who was supportive.

Not surprisingly, rumors that Avon Avenue School "was in play" began bouncing around the district. It would be June before Avon was designated formally and July before the Avon Avenue faculty and staff were informed officially that their school was about to be turned upside down.

MOU's, like strategic plans, are easier to negotiate than implement. BRICK had little time between the MOU agreement in April and the opening of school. Much of it was wasted.

It was Superintendent Janey's choice not to announce a "daring breakthrough in turning around chronically failed schools." He opted for a quiet roll-out that did not build unattainable expectations. However, the absence of an official announcement meant that there was no uniform understanding of what BRICK would be doing or clarity that this was a high-priority NPS project.

BRICK's creed was to create a sense of professional respect and community among Avon's teachers. To get started on the right foot, BRICK hoped to conduct a one-week summer orientation and professional development session with all teachers. Since BRICK's philosophy assumed that teachers would supply most of the day-to-day leadership, it was essential to get the faculty thinking in the new ways right away and together.

The planned session was disrupted by two developments. First, the Avon faculty did not learn of the management change until July in a letter signed by the South regional superintendent Dale Talbert, Charity Haygood as the new Avon principal, and Dominique Lee as the director of BRICK. School was out and summer schedules set. Second, the signals from the NTU, at first encouraging, became decidedly mixed with one senior official counseling against cooperation. The result: instead of all teachers attending a one-week session, BRICK was held to a three-day gathering that drew only about half the faculty.

BRICK would do as much as it could in the weeks after being given access to Avon Avenue to meet with teachers formally and informally. A meeting was held at the Robert Treat Hotel that attracted a small number of Avon teachers. Of course, there was no chance to observe any classes. From the teachers standpoint, late notice deprived them of prime pickings should they want to transfer.

The "April Surprise" called for more than a minor adjustment. It was a game changer.

Any parent can attest that there is a world of difference between a seven and a thirteen year-old. So can any teacher. BRICK's emphasis on the K-2 years was not to avoid the challenging world of the pre-teen middle grader, but to build a high-performing school over time by starting with intensive early literacy. The BRICK team had worked for months on the changes it sought in curriculum and classroom practices for the primary grades. Now, they were challenged to start with three times more students, all of them more difficult than K-2 kids.

BRICK accepted the challenge.

The middle grades 6-8 might better be called the "neglected" grades. Plenty of attention has been given in the public debate, policy-making, and charitable giving to the early years and to the high school years. By contrast, the middle grades have been largely neglected.

Dominique Lee's experience at Shabazz High School had convinced him that there was no way that high schools—however organized—could take 9th graders reading at the 5th grade level and simultaneously bring them up to level on reading and have them master the increasingly difficult content built around a pre-collegiate curriculum. Shabazz students come from the South Ward feeder schools like Avon and Madison who do not qualify for exam schools like Science Park and University or a charter high school.

Because little attention has been paid to the middle grades, there is less certainty about what works with sixth or seventh graders with serious gaps in their reading, writing, and math skills. The evidence is not promising. It is hard to find a middle school-level "reform" that shows consistent and significant improvement in the academic performance of large numbers of middle graders, particularly in high-poverty schools. Their reading liabilities prevent them from mastering the increasingly complex content expected by more rigorous state academic standards.

BRICK learned that it would take over Avon Avenue School the same month that NJDOE announced that Avon was "Tier I," spotlighting it as one of the twenty lowest-performing of New Jersey's 2,476 schools.

A pause for perspective: The national and New Jersey debate about failed public schools infers that schools fail because teachers and principals are lazy, incompetent, unmotivated, or some combination of the three. Yet, the Newark Public Schools dared to turn over a failed

school for five years to an unproven, youthful, newly-formed non-profit that emphasizes the leadership roles of the widely defamed teaching profession. By itself, that is a dare worth this story.

The second dare is that BRICK sought to takeover one of the state's lowest-performing school lock, stock, and barrel. After its K-2 proposal was rejected, it took on the much tougher, more complex challenge of a K-8 school. Most turnaround specialists want to be free to change teachers and students. BRICK was a rarity to take both as is.

SECTION THREE: The Inheritance

For an organization committed to empowering teachers, BRICK inherited a faculty about which it had very little information. And *vice versa.*

Each new superintendent and principal sets their stage with announcements of "change" and "new beginnings." Avon's teachers, like their NPS colleagues, have been exposed to repeated "reforms." Now, they were given late notice about inexperienced leaders implementing a daring, but unproven, philosophy.

Teachers going to BRICK's website would learn that it was new, consisted of recent Teach for America transplants (in a city suspicious of outsiders), and that it had a lofty vision for what could be accomplished. While quite specific about some principles and practices, the language employed was not too different from that of other reformers. Another year, another reform.

BRICK hoped that its one-week, intensive summer seminar would clear the air and bring everyone together to celebrate this teacher-run enterprise.

BRICK inherited students from some of New Jersey's poorest families in one of its poorest neighborhoods.

Among the twelve elementary-middle schools in the South Ward, only Bragaw, Hawthorne, and Dayton had (slightly) higher rates of students eligible for free lunch. Avon Avenue, at 90.3% in 2010, is, plainly, a "poor-only" school.

A generous description of Avon Avenue students would be "semi-literate."

On the 2010 NJASK language arts test, five of six of all Avon Avenue students in grades 3 through 7 were found to be below grade level. Only 8th graders scored above 20 percent proficiency (27.5 percent).

One should be careful, however, in using one year of NJASK results to declare anything conclusively. To make the point, consider three years of results on just the NJASK 3 test. The third grade reading test is selected because it is the threshold test for NCLB, but, more importantly, because reading is a practice that is acquired early or not at all. Also, reading proficiency at third grade turns out to be a reasonable predictor of who will finish high school nine years later. Students reading below proficiency are four times less likely to graduate than those who test proficient (on the NAEP).

In reviewing Table 1 below, one's eye is drawn to the dramatic year-to-year differences in average scale scores and in the percentages of 3rd graders deemed not proficient. For example, the statewide average proficiency plunged from 86% in 2009 to just 40% two years later. There are two possible explanations: 3rd graders in 2009 were particularly brilliant, whereas just two years later, 3rd graders were unusually resistant to learning; or the NJDOE changed radically the "cut score" to determine proficiency. Accept the second explanation as likely, please.

While single-year results are not helpful, the relationships among the categories in the table remain noticeably consistent year- to- year. Avon Avenue students, for example, tend to trail their Newark peers by about 20 percentage points, but test quite closely to Camden students (see yellow highlights). Newark students tend to track those in DFG A districts (other districts with low socio economic status; see green highlights), but to trail those in Union City by double digits.

Second, the results from Union City argue that "poverty is not destiny." Union City is a densely-packed city of 70,000 across from Manhattan. Its students, measured by free-lunch eligibility, may be the poorest in New Jersey (ahead of Camden and Newark). Very poor kids in schools with only other poor kids whose families speak no English is a trifecta of negative factors. Yet as indicated by Table 1, Union City's 3rd graders are close to the state average (as are Union City 8th graders).

Table 1.
Selected Results on 2009-10 NJASK3 Language Arts Test

	State All	Non-Abbott	**Avon Avenue**	Newark Public Sch.	DFG "A"	Camden	Union City
% PP*	59.8	55.8	**84.4**	63.1	64.5	83.0	43.3
Mean score	191.1	194.0	**176.2**	187.8	187.7	174.0	200.3

*"PP" = partially proficient

Selected Results on 2008-09 NJASK3 Language Arts Test

	State All	Non-Abbott	**Avon Avenue**	Newark Public Sch.	DFG "A"	Camden	Union City
% PP	37.3	31.7	**80.3**	59.5	59.5	80.1	43.2
Mean score	206.0	209.6	**174.6**	190.1	191.5	174.6	202.2

Selected Result on 2007-08 NJASK3 Language Arts Test

	State All	Non-Abbott	**Avon Avenue**	Newark Public Sch.	DFG "A"	Camden	Union City
% PP	14.0	10.4	**55.0**	31.2	28.4	48.3	18.0
Mean score	217..7	220.5	**192.6**	205.5	206.3	195.0	212.7

Not only was BRICK unprepared to absorb a middle school population, but the population it was inheriting was years behind.

Added cautions about using NJDOE test results. Unlike the National Assessment of Educational Progress ("NAEP"), New Jersey does not scale its tests vertically. This means that it is not possible to compare the scale scores for Avon Avenue's 6th graders' in 2010 with the 5th grade results from 2009 (assuming that all the 5th graders from 2009 attended Avon in 2010). Second, New Jersey does not apply consistent "cut scores" to determine Partial Proficiency, Proficiency, and Advanced Proficiency. Therefore, one cannot use the 2007 Avon Avenue 6th grade math results and the 2006 6th grade math results to determine if Avon is improving its 6th grade math instruction.

To correct for these disadvantages, the tables below compare Avon Avenue students with all Newark and all students in New Jersey for each of the years shown. No year-to-year conclusions should be drawn, but there is a clear pattern: Avon Avenue students performed noticeably lower than their Newark and New Jersey peers. They did so each year and by double-digit margins that fluctuated for reasons that cannot be fully explained, but track roughly changes in the cut scores set by NJDOE.

However the comparisons with Newark or New Jersey students bounce around, the results on the math test raise this question: *was there any intentional effort to teach mathematics to Avon Avenue students*? The highlighted results on the 7th grade test, on which only one in twenty five students pass, are only slightly worse than those in the two other grades.

The dismal numbers from Avon middle graders suggest that the rare student found to be performing at grade level is a fluke, not a product of consistent and focused instruction on content aligned to the state curricular standards. Even assuming that the New Jersey math test is fairly rigorous (and the statewide passing rates suggest that it is), there is no helpful explanation how the Avon results could be overlooked for so many years without triggering intensive attention from NPS.

While the language arts results are not as starkly negative, the pattern is not encouraging. Even though sometimes as many as 38 percent of Avon's 8th graders were reading on grade level, their performance compared to their Newark peers deteriorated over time. Between 2006 and 2010, for example, the gap between Avon 7th and 8th graders and their Newark peers widened from around ten to twenty plus percentage points. The 6th grade gap narrowed over the same period, but only because Newark performance overall declined so noticeably.

Table 2

NJASK Math Passing Percentage						
		2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Grade 6	Avon Ave School	12.3%	21.4%	14.3%	11%	12.8%
	Newark	35.5%	48.3%	39.9%	34.1%	38.2%
	New Jersey	53.5%	60%	52.1%	45.7%	48.5%
Grade7	Avon Ave School	11%	3.9%	4.1%	8.1%	4%
	Newark	34.7%	35.1%	30.1%	32.1%	27.3%
	New Jersey	49.8%	50.5%	44.6%	42.9%	40.1%
Grade 8	Avon Ave School	•3.5%	16.7%	16.3%	12.3%	11.3%
	Newark	26.1%	29.4%	29.2%	30.8%	30.8%
	New Jersey	43.6%	45.9%	42.8%	42%	39.7%

NJASK LAL Passing Percentage						
		2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Grade 6	Avon Ave School	14.9%	23%	16.3%	23.9%	14.7%
	Newark	44.3%	43.2%	28.8%	41.4%	33.5%
	New Jersey	65.8%	63.1%	55%	62.9%	57.9%
Grade7	Avon Ave School	43.8%	26.7%	21.2%	18.6%	16.3%
	Newark	53.4%	51.2%	38.2%	39.7%	37.7%
	New Jersey	70.3%	67.8%	55%	54.1%	51.9%
Grade 8	Avon Ave School	*33.3%	28.1%	38.8%	38.4%	27.5%
	Newark	43.1%	47%	54.4%	53.4%	54.1%
	New Jersey	65.7%	62.4%	70%	71.3%	64.4%

*2006 was the last year that the Grade Eight Performance Assessment (GEPA) was administered. Thereafter, eighth graders were given the NJASK8, prepared by the vendor of the grade 3-7 tests.

To add to the challenge, one third of the middle graders come from Madison Avenue School.

If Newark had a clear, uniform, and well-implemented curriculum, it might not make much difference to the BRICK team that a large share of its middle graders was prepared at a different school. That way, BAA teachers would know the content and pacing of what students had been taught in the K-5 years. Alas, Newark's curriculum is more a dust-gathering document than a widely-used guide for planning daily, weekly, and unit lessons.

Thus, in addition to the other complications posed by the unexpected inheritance of 250 or so pre-teens, BRICK faced questions of "alignment," "vertical integration" and coordination with a neighboring K-5 school.

A third big obstacle is that educators are so uncertain about what to do with middle graders, particularly those concentrated in poor neighborhoods.

There is broad agreement about the expectations and hopes for children in the early school years. "K-3: learn to read; 4-12: read to learn" is the old saw. It is relatively easy to find consensus about the value of high quality preschool, full-day kindergarten, or smaller class sizes in the primary grades.

High schools are visible, often because of sports and keen rivalries. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation spent billions on how to scale down urban high schools. SAT, AP, and ACT scores are regularly employed to measure high school quality as are graduation rates and college acceptances.

The middle grades are left out. Due to the lack of consensus among researchers and policymakers, the BRICK team would not find nearly as much guidance and consensus as it would about the K-3 years.

SECTION FOUR: Avon Avenue School becomes BRICK Avon Academy

The BRICK team concentrates on creating a culture of professional respect, collegiality, and teacher leadership; focusing the K-3 grade classes on intensive early literacy; and, preparing everyone for major changes in the second year. But first, there are more prosaic details to attend to.

Before BRICK can deliver on its proposal, its deal with NPS must be approved by the hierarchy. Dr. Dale Talbert was the regional assistant superintendent for the South, responsible for 12 K-5 or K-8 schools enrolling about 4,100 students plus Shabazz High School. Charity Haygood had to be interviewed and recommended by the Avon School Leadership Council, effectively a panel of teachers.

It is late July before Charity Haygood is given the keys to Avon Avenue School. School will open in about forty days and there are classrooms and halls to be brightened with fresh paint, steel grids to be removed from classroom windows, and introductions to be made to the faculty, parents, and community. Dominique Lee joins the BRICK Avon Academy team as "operations leader," his salary paid by BRICK to NPS. Chris Perpich is the vice-principal for the K-5 grades.

Given the "April Surprise" and the challenge of taking on the middle grades, BRICK was very lucky that Fred Chatman, already at Avon Avenue School, could step in as the second vice-principal for the middle grades.

Rumors about Avon Avenue School re-opening as a charter school, would divert the BRICK team at a critical time.

However the rumor was started and circulated, it succeeded in creating confusion and uncertainty about school opening and who would be enrolled. To contain the rumor, the BRICK team and a few staff and community volunteers used the 2009-10 register to go to each student's home to tell the story of BRICK Avon. At the suggestion of an activist neighbor, every family and the wider community was invited to a late-summer BBQ held on the school grounds that drew about 400 people

BRICK was ready to introduce big changes in curriculum and instruction in the K-5 grades, but 2010-11 would be a "planning year" for the middle grades.

The BRICK team had spent 18 months working out the details of "re-starting" the K-2 program. Its members had read the research and visited elementary schools where poor kids were doing very well. It had concluded that making sure that kindergarteners were "ready to read" and that 3rd graders were reading on grade level were essential goals. They began 2010-11 with very concrete ideas about intensifying literacy instruction.

But the team began with few ideas about what to do with teaching and learning in grades 6-8, where the results were abysmal. "Abysmal" is a strong word, but a school in which proficiency on 7th grade math tests are in the single digits four years in a row earns that description. As it

turned out, by working with middle grades faculty and introducing interim measurements of how well students were mastering content, BRICK Avon made some modest changes in curriculum and instruction.

To improve literacy, BAA teachers in the primary grades needed to know how well each student was prepared to read. The introduction of "STEP" allowed teachers to begin tailoring instruction to meet the needs of individual students in the K-3 grades.

Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress ("STEP") was developed by the University of Chicago's Urban Education Institute to help the Chicago public schools improve literacy. It is now used by about 150 schools across the nation, primarily in Chicago and high-performing charter schools like KIPP and North Star in Newark.

Reading has been widely studied over many decades. We know a lot about how young children prepare for reading, what they need to know before they come to kindergarten, and what can be done with kids who are not on track to read by 3rd grade. While primary graders learn reading at different paces, it is well established that reading is a practice that is best acquired by 3rd grade. After that, slow or non- readers have great difficulty catching up. Most never do.

STEP breaks down the knowledge, vocabulary, and skills young students need into several tiers at each grade, preschool through 3rd grade. Based on STEP, kindergarteners who are on track to be readers by 3rd grade, master Steps 1 to 3; first graders move through Steps 4 to 6; second graders Steps 7 to 9; and, third graders through Steps 10 to 12.

By using STEP assessments, teachers can spot which kids are having what troubles and adjust their instructional focus accordingly. STEP requires "differentiated" teaching, meaning that instruction is tailored to each student's level and most instruction, therefore, takes place in small groups. While the teacher works with one small group, another group reads independently, a third works on computers. So, for a kindergarten student who is at Step 1, STEP supplies books that match the student's mastery and facilitates her/his advancement to Step 2. The idea is to get to Step 12 by third grade. STEP claims that the overwhelming majority of those at Step 12 will be proficient on a state's 3rd grade literacy assessment.

The STEP results from the 2010 Fall test were dramatic, signaling the depth of the literacy problem BRICK inherited.

The initial fall test revealed that only nine of 60 kindergarten students had even minimal preparation for getting ready to read (see Figure 1 below). The blue bar—"zero" Step—confirms the almost total absence of five year-olds who knew their letters or colors or could count to 20. It is this kindergarten gap that is rarely targeted for closure, with the result that students are passed along between the primary grades with little chance of reading by 3rd grade.

No information is available about the number of BAA kindergarten students who attended preschool. Preschool standards for teacher qualifications and the richness of the curriculum

are much higher than they are for Head Start or day care centers. Kindergarten students who attended preschool even one year should not be scoring zero on the STEP assessments. Either very few BAA kindergarteners attended preschool or the preschools they attended were of such low quality that they should be closed down by NPS.

A look at the Summer assessment indicates that the more than three-quarters of BAA kindergarteners were ready to move on to first grade; in fact, 38.3 percent (23) were already performing at first grade levels. This fact deserves special attention. BAA's three kindergarten teachers inherited only nine students ready for kindergarten; nine months later they handed off forty-seven students ready for first grade! The progress demonstrated between the Spring and Summer assessments suggests that momentum was building up all year that exploded at the end.

For those that were still at preschool levels of mastery, BAA took the controversial step of requiring them to repeat kindergarten.

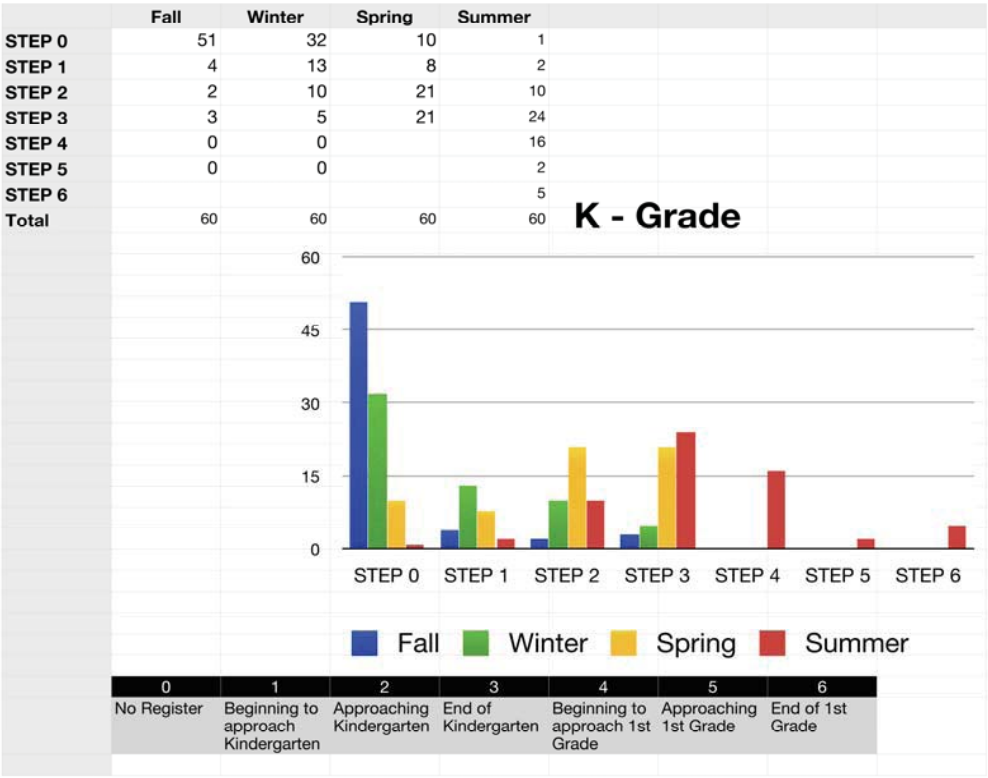


Figure 1 Kindergarten STEP Assessment Results

These results affirm the view, backed by considerable evidence, that primary grade students are eager learners. If exposed to intensive instruction to achieve clear and concrete academic goals, they will respond.

The STEP results for second graders on the fall assessment were dismaying, suggesting that little instruction took place in the students' first two years at Avon Avenue School.

The foregoing assertion may not be entirely fair or complete because we do not know if all 47 students were enrolled at Avon Avenue for both kindergarten and first grade. With this caution in mind, it appears that Figure 3 confirms that most second graders at BAA arrived having made no progress in their first two years of school. Only three of 47 were on grade level! In fact, 30 of them (68.2 percent) were performing at the kindergarten level, at least a full year behind. Effectively, second grade teachers at BAA were challenged to make three years of academic progress in one to get their second graders on level. Impossible.

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
STEP 0				
STEP 1	4	1		
STEP 2	11	8	2	2
STEP 3	15	16	5	3
STEP 4	8	5	7	11
STEP 5	6	9	15	9
STEP 6		5	3	5
STEP 7	2		9	5
STEP 8	1	3	4	7
STEP 9			2	4
STEP 10				1
STEP 11				
STEP 12				
Total	47	47	47	47

1	2	3
Beginning to approach Kindergarten	Approaching Kindergarten	End of Kindergarten

4	5	6
Beginning to approach 1st Grade	Approaching 1st Grade	End of 1st Grade

7	8	9
Beginning to approach 2nd Grade	Approaching 2nd Grade	End of 2nd Grade

10	11	12
Beginning to approach 3rd grade	Approaching 3rd Grade	End of 3rd Grade

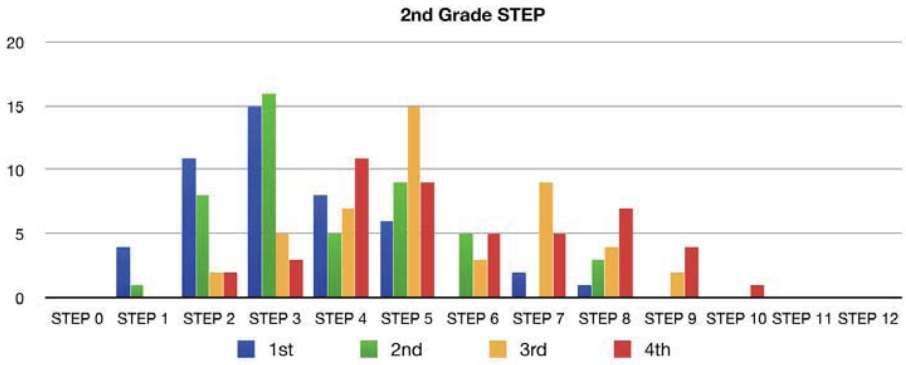


Figure 2 Second Grade STEP Assessment Results

The winter test showed that most students (53 percent) were still at the kindergarten level. Given that second grade teachers were being exposed to a brand new pedagogical system of assessment and curriculum beginning in September, it should be no surprise that dramatic progress was not made in the first few months. The spring test showed there were important

gains in literacy, with almost a third of students (31 percent) now reading at one of the second grade levels and only seven still at kindergarten levels.

The fourth ("summer") test is given in late April or early May. One student was now reading at the third grade level while sixteen of her/his classmates were reading at a second grade level, indicating important progress in just seven months. Despite this progress, the proportion of students at least one year behind grade level would remain static at thirty. Of these, five tested at the kindergarten level and 11 at the beginning of 1st grade—these 16 students would be retained to repeat 2d grade in September 2011 (two would not re-enroll).

Implementation of this intensive, data-driven process allowed teachers, school leaders, and parents to track student mastery against grade level goals for this most important habit—reading. Most of the students appear to have made a full year's progress, something that was previously unknown at Avon Avenue School. Some did even better, exceptional in any school. So, third grade teachers could expect to receive in September 2011 a class in which a tenth of students were on grade level and one quarter less than a full year below grade level.

The STEP assessments for the third grade (Figure 3 below), reveal that not a single student out of 44 was ready for third grade material. One quarter were at the kindergarten level, a full two years plus below grade level. One half were still testing at first grade levels. By the fourth assessment, one student was at grade level and nine were reading third grade materials. Three remained at a kindergarten level and would be retained in third grade along with 13 classmates reading at first grade levels (four would not re-enroll in September 2011).. Thus, of the 28 students recommended for promotion to 4th grade, most of them (16) would be at least one full year behind grade level.

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
STEP 0	1			
STEP 1	3			
STEP 2	3	3	3	2
STEP 3	4			1
STEP 4	6	3	4	3
STEP 5	8	6	5	3
STEP 6	8	8	8	9
STEP 7	3	4	4	5
STEP 8	8	5	4	3
STEP 9		10	11	8
STEP 10		3	3	5
STEP 11		2	2	4
STEP 12				1
Total	44	44	44	44

1	2	3
Beginning to approach Kindergarten	Approaching Kindergarten	End of Kindergarten

4	5	6
Beginning to approach 1st Grade	Approaching 1st Grade	End of 1st Grade

7	8	9
Beginning to approach 2nd Grade	Approaching 2nd Grade	End of 2nd Grade

10	11	12
Beginning to approach 3rd grade	Approaching 3rd Grade	End of 3rd Grade

Figure 3 Third Grade STEP Assessment Results

STEP apparently expects more of third graders than the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards and the NJASK3 test do. This may help explain why its biggest customers are high-performing charter schools like KIPP. While only one of BAA third graders tested on the level expected at the end of the 3rd grade, 35 percent were deemed proficient on the NJASK3 Language Arts test. This might suggest that the state's test is closer to an end of *second grade* level. In any event, to go from only a 15 percent proficiency rate at Avon Avenue on the Spring 2010 test to 35 percent a year later signals impressive progress.

The introduction of Mandarin Chinese was BRICK's signal that it is serious about making BAA a "World School" as defined by International Baccalaureate.

Mandarin is the dominant language of China , now the world's second largest economy. It is, also, a very difficult language to master. BRICK is sending a strong message that the goal of IB certification is a serious one. Imagine the confidence required to introduce such a difficult language in a school where two-thirds of the 3rd graders cannot read and write English. Oliver Street School, one of Newark's higher-performing schools, is the only other NPS elementary school offering Mandarin.

There are significant costs to Mandarin instruction. First, it took until February to recruit a qualified teacher and to negotiate the change in the faculty "floor plan" with the NPS

personnel office. Second, a teaching position that might have been used to bolster literacy or math achievement was sacrificed for Mandarin.

Kindergarten students had one, forty minute Mandarin class weekly; 1st through 4th had two. The plan is to extend Mandarin one grade each year until all nine grades are being taught. The focus for this year, according to Ms. Lin the teacher, is dialogue, listening, speaking, and an introduction to Chinese culture. Students have learned to introduce themselves, say the colors, boy, girl, body parts, and, "We want peace, not war."

In the fifth grade, students will be introduced to Spanish, and will take both languages through 8th grade. The notion is that students can select Mandarin or Spanish to concentrate on in high school. Currently, all Newark high schools offer Spanish; none offer Mandarin (although not all high schools display all courses). This void may be filled by the time current 4th graders move onto high school.

Beyond Mandarin, BRICK would take seriously the idea of a "rigorous and challenging curriculum" by adopting a controversial promotion policy. Students who were clearly not ready to advance would be retained.

A "rigorous and challenging curriculum" rolls automatically off the tongues of public educators these days. It qualifies as a cliché. "World class" usually accompanies it. No state frames its curricular content standards by declaring that they are devised to leave plenty of time for organized athletics, relaxation, texting with friends, and mastering video games. Most states then go onto design their tests of those "world class" standards to avoid having too many of their schools fail to make adequate yearly progress per the No Child Left Behind Act.

BRICK uses the same words, but acts very differently. In its first year, BAA recommended that almost one in four students repeat their grade level in 2011-12. Unheard of! Figure 4 below confirms BRICK's controversial philosophy.

Figure 4
Students retained in grade level, 2010-11

Grade	Enrollment	Retained	Returned 2011
K	60	11	10
1st	59	16	15
2nd	48	16	14
3rd	56	16	12
4th	58	16	13
5th	49	12	9
6th	79	24	15
7th	65	25	13
8th	87	**0**	N.A.

The controversy is greatest over the retention of older students, where numerous longitudinal studies have shown that students retained in the middle grades are less likely to graduate high school than students with similar academic records at the time who are promoted. It is much more common, therefore, to find retention practiced in kindergarten and 1st grade where the social consequences and physical differences may not be as great. As it turns out, BAA was most likely to hold students back in the grades where the least retention occurs. Except, that is, for 8th graders who were uniformly promoted to high school (on the theory that the consequences of not making such an important transition with one's classmates would be the most negative).

The BRICK operating philosophy was to keep parents well informed about their children's progress throughout the academic year. At the conclusion of every "report card" period, all parents would be invited to meet with their child's teacher(s) and receive a "BRICK plan" for the year. The plan would indicate where the child stood against the expectations of progress. If the child were performing below expectations, the parent would learn what steps could be taken to close the gap to avoid the possibility of retention.

Therefore, for significant numbers of parents who attended teacher conferences, the decision to hold their children back came as no surprise, and there were few inflamed protests from this subgroup. For parents who did not keep up to date on their child's progress, news of the decision was unexpected and unpleasant. Particularly in the middle grades, it appears that parents made their own decision to enroll their child in a different school (even though the attendance boundaries are intended to be inviolate). The NPS central office, which was in the midst of a transition from the Janey to Anderson administrations reacted not at all.

Whatever the longer-term consequences, BRICK could not have sent a stronger message to students, teachers, or parents about the seriousness of its pledge for a "rigorous and challenging curriculum."

BRICK's plans are built on increased instructional time. In the first year it offered a voluntary after-school tutoring program.

BRICK team member Mindy Weidman took the lead to explore what programs could be initiated to extend the instructional school day. After investigating several options, she suggested "Building Educated Leaders for Life" (BELL), which the BRICK team visited at a Brooklyn school. It was selected because it was not a "package" of off-the-shelf lesson plans, but required teachers to target their teaching to the level of student mastery.

Importantly, BELL is a qualified supplemental educational service (SES) tutoring program, meaning that Federal Title I funds could be used, not scarce NPS dollars. SES funding requires parents to apply. With the encouragement of BAA faculty and staff, parents of 90 percent of BAA students applied. However, NPS approved only students in grades K-2 and 6-8 as eligible for Title I funding. Nearly 200 of approximately 370 eligible students attended BELL for five months, mid-January to mid-June. For students in grades 3-5, BRICK raised

outside funds to permit another 80 students to attend from February 1- May 9 (the week after the NJASK exam).

BELL employs certified teachers and college students, paired to work with 20 students to re-enforce drills on the skills tested by the state. Only one BRICK Avon teacher worked for BELL—a third grade teacher. Not surprisingly, communication about student work between BELL and the 3rd grade classroom teachers was the strongest of all the grades. Widener states that BELL-BAA communication was sufficient overall.

BELL gives a baseline diagnostic skills assessment for each student that identifies skills that need to be strengthened. For both Non-SES and SES students, their reading and math scores improved significantly. The results for SES and non-SES are similar, even though the non-SES were tutored for six fewer weeks than were SES students. Figures 5 and 6 display the pre- and post-test results for grade 3-5 students.

Figure 5. NON-SES students Math and Reading Assessment Results in BELL program

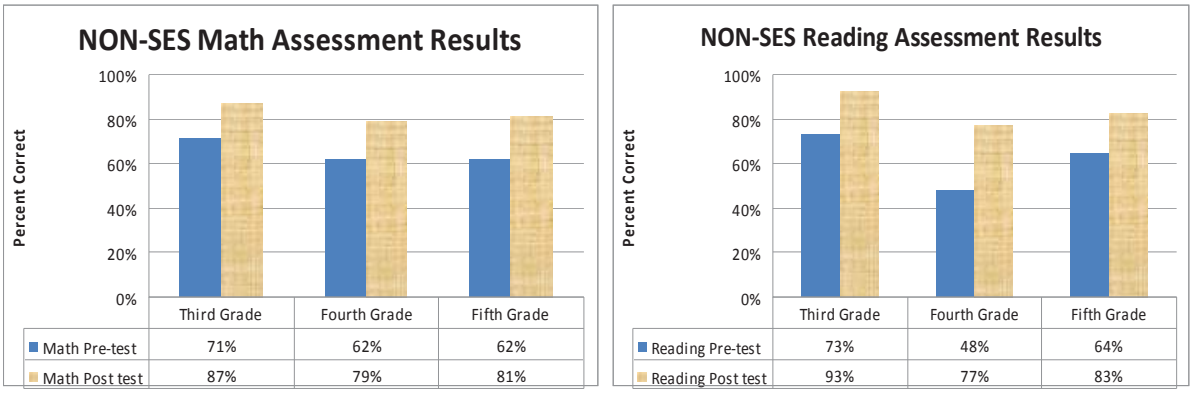
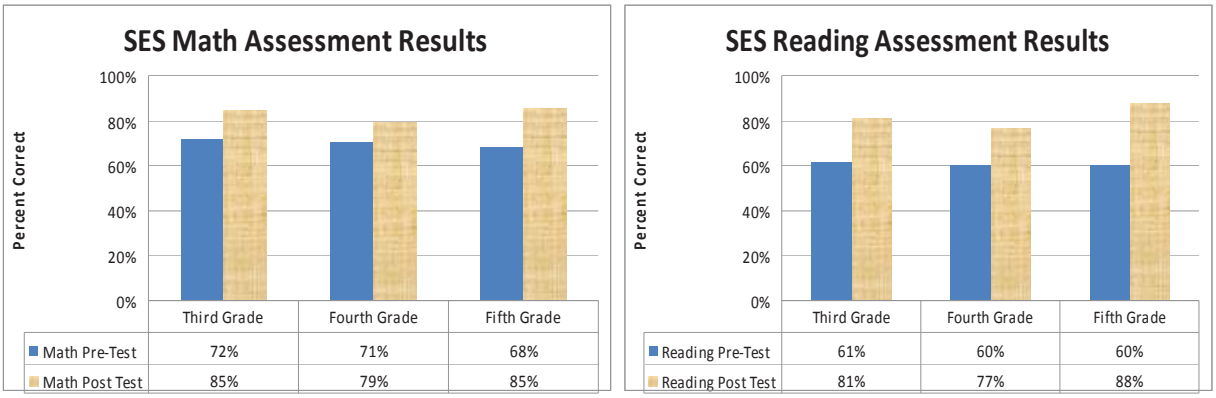


Figure 6. SES Students Math and Reading Assessment Results in BELL Program



As with the results from the STEP assessments used in the K-3 grades, it is not easy to connect the BELL results to performance on the NJASK tests. Since state standards in the early grades for language arts and math are likely to be similar, one could assume that the BELL assessments are aligned with the New Jersey standards and tests. Information connecting a student's participation in BELL with their NJASK results was not available.

SECTION FIVE: Mission Impossible: Improving Middle Grades Performance in Failed Schools

The BRICK team did not have a clear plan for improving middle grades instruction. Nobody at NPS had a clear idea, either. And, it appears, nobody at NJDOE had a helpful proposal to make. Instead of supporting BRICK's suggestions, NPS insisted that BAA continue the use of curricular materials proven ineffective.

"Planning year" can be an excuse for not doing anything. It's frequently a "kick-the-can-down-the-road" ploy. Actually, a planning year can make sense when something as complicated as a public school in a poor neighborhood is involved. For example, the Chicago school system has probably shut down more failing schools than any system, but it gave the new leadership teams a full academic year to get ready for the takeover. During that year they had *no operating responsibilities.*

The BRICK team did have operating responsibilities and not much time. What it had, however, was the intention to closely involve teachers in diagnosing and correcting pedagogical problems. The team began with some strong ideas that applied to any teachers at any grade level. As they rolled out these ideas and tried to live by them every day, the inherited vice principal and middle grades faculty responded.

Backward and long-term planning require that teachers have much more time than usual to work together. BRICK's commitment to increased common planning time was hindered by the NPS-NTU contract and the 2010-11 school budget. The K-5 teachers had five hours for planning weekly: two 60-minute prep periods; one 45-minute K-5 Vertical Team meeting; and three 45-minute Grade Level meetings, two of which are back to back. The middle grade teachers have only two 45-minute departmental meetings on different days, and one 45-minute grade level meeting.
.

The BRICK vision relies on using lots of evidence of student work to guide personalization of instruction. "Differentiated" instruction calls for small groups of students working with the teacher on shared learning issues. Evidence of student work is needed to compose homogenous groups. In the primary grades, BRICK introduced a new source of data—STEP. It fell to the middle grades teachers and BAA leadership to work out their own measures of progress.

In a more perfect setting, BAA would simply refer to an accessible, frequently updated, and rich curriculum managed by NPS. This curriculum would include periodic district-administered interim assessments to see how students are progressing, say, in science in early December. Teachers and principals would receive results quickly that would highlight which parts of the science curriculum are being mastered, and which parts require additional emphasis.

BAA works in a "less perfect" setting. It must decide on its own interim assessments.

To the lay reader, this may sound like a relatively simple task for any well-prepared educator to complete. Not so. Finding useful, quick, and reliable assessments that are aligned with the state standards is very tricky. In fact, it is unfair to expect that the teachers and administrators of a 600-student school have the time or capacity to produce this essential metric. Instead, it should be a routine responsibility of the NPS staff at 2 Cedar Street.

Without a workable NPS curriculum and supporting guidance, BAA was on its own in trying to dig out from under years of failure in the middle grades.

It might help to look back at the NJASK scores from 2006-2010 (page 17). One would have to conclude that no effective instruction took place in mathematics, not when the average year produced a proficiency rate that bounced between five and sixteen percent. The performance on the literacy tests was more mixed. Mixed but not encouraging. If the proficiency rate among all Newark students is fifteen to twenty-five points behind the state average, the Avon Avenue proficiency rate was fifteen to twenty-five points behind the Newark averages. Put another way, Avon Avenue students typically performed below students statewide who were classified as disabled! And not by a little bit.

Faced with such overwhelming evidence, BAA teachers and staff decided not to spend the full year analyzing, sorting, and planning. Instead, they concluded rather quickly that the curricular materials adopted by NPS were not helpful or relevant to BAA's middle grade students.

At the same time, Avon's dismal math results illustrate the consequences of an inflexible central office sticking to its guns no matter the outcome. NPS uses "Connected Math" as its choice for the middle grades. At Avon Avenue School, it was clear that "Connected" was either not aligned with the NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards or, if aligned, was well beyond the grasp of Avon students (four consecutive years of single digit proficiency rates justify such a conclusion).

Following discussions of the difficulties encountered and a review of other math series, the faculty and staff agreed to switch from Connected to "Ramp Up," the math series of America's Choice. "Ramp Up" is promoted as a one-year, three tier program designed especially for students in grades 6 through 9 who are struggling with math skills and concepts. It fits BRICK's search for evidence-driven instruction as it comes with a pre-test to place each student and frequent interim assessments that can be used to adjust instruction as a student makes progress, or does not. The aim of "Ramp Up" is to prepare middle grades students for their introduction to algebraic concepts and practices.

This is where the story ends for BRICK's first year. The central office would not approve the switch to "Ramp Up." It had invested heavily in "Connected" and was not about to divert funds to any alternative. The advice from Cedar Street: Teach "Connected" at grade level, even if your students are two or more years behind. This is the decision of the central office that observed years of little or no progress in Avon and other South Ward schools without intervening to find more effective practices.

For language arts, NPS ordains the reading series, McDougal-Littell. As with its "Connected Math," it plainly was not working at Avon Avenue School. Here, BRICK enjoyed the advantage that one of its team members had taught an alternative reading program aimed at students behind in reading. Read 180 was used at Shabazz High School and was well known to Bernadette Scott who brought her experience and materials to BAA. Of the 200 or so 9th graders at Shabazz, all of them except for one class used Read 180.

Read 180 incorporates many of the principles and practices identified by BRICK as essential. It includes frequent assessments of progress with clues for the teacher as to how to adjust instruction to meet each student's needs. Importantly, instead of relying on a single text or anthology, Read 180 provides an array of print and electronic reading that is leveled to capture each student's reading competency, but with content that is age appropriate. Thus, a sixth grader reading on the second grade level is not limited to reading about furry animals that talk or Brady Bunch-like family settings.

Read 180 also re-enforces ideas of concentrated and small group instruction. The ideal situation is ninety minutes of uninterrupted literacy instruction with most of it in small groups working with the teacher, using computer-based exercises and content, or in independent reading. Thus, Bernadette worked with her classes of 24 in groups of eight, while her colleagues continued with, primarily, whole-class instruction and McDougal-Littell. The differences became a frequent subject of department meetings and a consensus that Read 180 should replace McDougal.

For a first-year takeover that anticipated little change, the seeds of major change had been planted.

SECTION SIX: Creating a collegial, respectful school culture is essential. And not easy to do.

School culture counts for a lot. It is easier to spot the ineffective school culture than it is to produce a culture that works for students, teachers, and parents. The BRICK team had more experience in schools that did not work than in those that did. Only Chris Perpich taught at a higher-performing, but very small, school, Branch Brook.

Clocks tend to run unproductive schools, along with labor contracts and a lack of curiosity. Students are dismissed at 2:45 and teachers are gone by 3:10. Spending extra time with struggling students is discouraged unless there is extra pay. Discipline, paperwork, and administrative trivia dominate what little time is spent in grade or school-level meetings. Teachers work in isolation; principals spend little to no time in classrooms.

Unproductive schools are less schools than they are compliance factories that can prove their adherence to Memorandum 2011-147 or to regulation18A:16-(b)(3). They produce prodigious amounts of paperwork on time with signatures on the right lines, but they don't teach kids.

BRICK sets forth principles and practices that it expects to prevail in a BRICK-run school. The principles and practices are written in the present tense, as if one can observe their implementation today in every respect. In fact, all the principles and practices are not in place, which should come as no surprise except to those who hold the popular belief that turning around Avon Avenue School is something that just about any hard-working person should be able to accomplish and quickly.

At the top of BRICK's list is respect for teacher and students. The respect is set forth in the expectation that BRICK Avon Academy can become a "World School" as determined by the International Baccalaureate by the 2013-14 school year. Given its inheritance and the track record of Avon Avenue School, setting this goal is akin to expecting the local high school baseball team to beat the New York Yankees.

The map of how to get from one of the worst-performing schools in America to a World School in three years begins with the belief—confirmed daily—that BAA students can master, and BAA teachers can teach, the most rigorous curriculum available anywhere. This qualifies as "high expectations."

Holding teachers and students to high expectations does not count unless it is followed by a clear roadmap of what content and skills students need to master and when. Learning is cumulative: students who cannot write a coherent paragraph should not be expected to produce a research paper. Setting a clear path to high school graduation that prepares graduates to master the academics at a four-year university is best done backwards. So, if a junior should be ready for AP pre-calculus, what does that mean for the level of mastery required in 7th grade math?

All of this should *not* be the sole responsibility of any school, principal, or faculty. In exemplary districts like Montgomery County, MD and Union City, the district takes the lead

in bringing teachers and content specialists together to write and re-write the curriculum. In the absence of a usable district curriculum, BRICK assumed this responsibility. In 2010-11, however, there was not the time to work backward from the academic demands of the first year of college. But this did not prevent BRICK from plotting with middle grade teachers what content and pace they should expect for the academic year. The result is described above with the frustrated attempt to abandon of the NPS textbooks for data-rich programs in both reading ("Read 180") and math ("RampUp") that are aimed at struggling students.

Teachers need "differentiated" support because their students need personalized instruction and that requires evidence of student work and constant adjustments to teaching in small groups. With all the challenges of the first year, BRICK gave a very high priority to increasing the flow of usable evidence of how well students are performing. STEP, Ramp UP, and READ 180 all supply each teacher with specific information about student progress or lack thereof. Learning to use this information and re-arranging small groups to be as homogenous as possible is a difficult adjustment.

High expectations and a clearer curriculum do not ensure instruction that is engaging to students and teachers alike. BRICK included in its " instructional bricks," two practices to enliven teaching and learning: common planning time that is used to develop lesson plans across subjects. In sixth grade, this might take the form of a unit that explores the development of the theory of evolution by incorporating the 1848 voyage of the *Beagle* to the Galapagos Islands and Darwin's biography, leading to a research paper. The point is to get teachers working together across subjects and to lessen reliance on watered-down commercial textbooks by identifying a variety of relevant print and electronic materials.

In calmer times when the BRICK team was hashing out its vision for operating a failed school, it "established 5 instructional bricks that serve as the cornerstone of our instructional program and drive all decision making."
The "bricks" were evident in BAA's first year, although none of them were fully integrated into the school day. They are:

- Long Term, Unit and Lesson Planning;
- Common Planning Time
- Data-Informed Instruction
- Common Assessments
- Student Investment and Choice

Student choice was the least developed of the five bricks. It is a "brick" of greatest relevance to middle-grade students who benefit from extracurricular activities like chorus, basketball, double-dutch, and—in 2010-11—flag football.

In 2010-11, change was more cultural than structural. That is, it was harder to see and measure.

There's a lot to do at a school that doesn't work. The BRICK team would learn that much of what it planned could not be implemented in year one. The basic idea was to give everyone a sense of ownership and responsibility for BRICK Avon's success.

First, comes governance or who makes what decisions about what things? In most Newark schools, the principal decides. S/he can decide to share decision making or not, but it's the principal's choice.

BRICK had a very different idea. Start with the idea that the principal's job would be "distributed" among colleagues: one to handle everything having to do with the BAA operations and NPS relations; one to handle data about student/teacher performance; one to handle school "culture" and discipline; and two vice-principals for K-5 and 6-8 grades respectively. The idea is to liberate the principal to be a true instructional leader. In BAA's case Charity Haygood would concentrate on changing the overall instructional culture and be responsible for helping kindergarten and 1st grade teachers.

"Leaders" are not always official. Mindy Weidman is on the payroll as Technology Coordinator, but acted as the Data Leader and led the after-school program (BELL). Fred Chatman was Curriculum Leader for grades 6-8, but took the lead on discipline. Two "leader" positions were unfilled, officially or informally: Discipline/School Culture and the Social, Emotional and Physical Health/Parent Involvement leaders were not assigned.

Dominique Lee has a complicated role. First, he is the founder and director of BRICK, which includes fund-raising. He was the chief negotiator with NPS and remains BRICK's informal ambassador to 2 Cedar Street. His day job is as Operations Leader, meaning he is responsible for everything non-instructional: facilities, purchasing, budgeting, payroll, equipment, maintenance, security. In 2010-11, he was on the NPS payroll but with funds raised by BRICK to save money in the BAA budget. His job is to free Ms Haygood to be a true instructional leader. On top of all this, Mr. Lee also plays an unspecified role in helping push the changes in teaching and learning. He pays a lot of attention to what happens in classrooms.

BRICK contemplated a School Governance Council as a way to engage all stakeholders in issues of education, budgeting, and operations. The Council is not a novel idea. During the decade or so that Newark schools were subject to regulation under the *Abbott v. Burke* rulings, each school had a council that included representatives of the faculty, non-instructional staff, parents, and the community. The council even had the short-lived authority to adopt the school's budget, which was not subject to the review of the NPS central office. It was also to be consulted in the appointment of the principal. The 2010-11 BAA Council included the principal, a representative from BRICK, NTU and the instructional and non-instructional

staff. Parent, grade 6-8 students, and community representatives were not selected. The short-handed Council met irregularly.

BRICK's philosophy relies on teachers as leaders to help change the instructional culture.

The BRICK team added two teachers to the BAA faculty, Bernadette Scott and Princess Williams, and Mindy Weidman as the Technology Coordinator. Otherwise, the faculty was pretty much the same from 2009-10. All the teachers were tenured and most of them had spent their entire careers at Avon Avenue School.

In common with many of their colleagues, Avon's teachers suffered from "reform fatigue." A teacher survey revealed that two out of three agree that they cannot keep track of all the programs and that many programs come and go. Not only does every new principal or superintendent introduce "reforms" or "new horizons," but the inference at Avon Avenue is that it is the teachers who have contributed to its "persistently failing" status and that it's time for radical change.

One "reform" introduced at Avon Avenue was Success for All, a reading and math program for low-performing elementary schools that was designed to be "teacher neutral." That was the message of this "Whole School Reform" introduced as a part of the *Abbott v. Burke* school finance decision: teachers are not to be trusted.

So, how does a team of less experienced teachers convince grizzled veterans that this time it will be different? Humility and patience. BRICK is not without confidence, aggressiveness, boldness, or impatience. Otherwise, it would not take on the agenda it has. Unlike most reformers, BRICK does not introduce The Answer, and then blame continued failure on imperfect or incomplete implementation. "If we had The Answer," said Dominique Lee, "we'd all be millionaires." Instead, with patience and humility, the BRICK team seeks to build a community of enthusiastic, reflective, flexible professionals who trust one another.

The BRICK idea was to select Grade Level Leaders (GLL) at each of the K-5 grades to act as conveners and facilitators of meetings to plan together, and to be the ambassador to the "Vertical Team" to establish transparency and coherence grade to grade. These were informal gatherings with a leader and two colleagues. For the middle grades, BRICK introduced the idea of a Department Team that was composed of one leader for each subject: Language Arts Literacy, Mathematics, Science, and Humanities.

The teacher survey reveals that teachers believe that BRICK Avon Academy can develop an effective professional learning community (see Appendix). BAA teachers strongly agree that teachers work hard to help their students and care about them. Almost all teachers agree that teachers collaborate to discuss student work and review data about it. There is less agreement about the willingness of their colleagues to try new ideas (only one in six think "nearly all" are willing), take risks or to accept responsibility when students fail (over half think less than half accept responsibility).

That said, most teachers think that the school is on the right track and that they have been included in planning and opportunities to work with their colleagues. About one-third think that there is insufficient coordination and consistency between the curriculum and the instructional materials and instruction.

The teacher survey was taken in the second half of BAA's first year. Given the skepticism about serial "reforms" and rotating programs, BRICK has created a healthy relationship with its teaching colleagues. Teachers feel positively about their colleagues and about working with them. Most of them are open to taking some risks to improve academics at BAA.

SECTION SEVEN: Building "community and family partnerships" is the most difficult BRICK objective to deliver.

Educators routinely invoke their powerful kinship with parents and community.

Note, for example, that the proposals for new teacher accountability measures give little or no weight to a teacher's willingness and effectiveness in connecting with parents or the community. The question arises: is building community and family partnerships a part of the soft rhetoric of public education or an important part of improving education?

BRICK gave a mixed answer to the question in 2010-11.

There may be another NPS school where the principal and staff went door-to-door to meet every student's family during the dog days of August. If so, it received no attention for doing so. The BRICK team did precisely that in 2010 to introduce itself and to squash the rumor that BRICK Avon Academy was a charter school.

Put the door-to-door effort in perspective. Imagine you are taking over a 600- student K-8 school that was confirmed only two months before opening day. You gain possession of the school in July and there is a lot of painting and maintenance to get underway. You want to organize events to meet the faculty, plus run a three-day orientation session. Now, add to your growing list knocking on 400 or so doors to introduce yourself and take a quick survey about the family.

On top of the door-to-door survey, BRICK invited all students and families to a BBQ the weekend before school opened. It was well attended and students received a red BAA tee shirt to help with the name change. Additional families completed the survey. Principal Haygood said:

> I want BRICK Avon Academy to become a beacon for this community, and when the lights are on, we are a beacon . . . When the kids are playing basketball they're here. Yes, it is definitely family/community combined. The BRICK model says we have to embrace this in order to be successful.

The "beacon" reference coincided with Haygood going directly to the Superintendent to request that lights be installed immediately in the school yard (a suggestion from a community activist who referenced the triple night-time murder at a nearby NPS school). It worked and the lights gave early credibility to the seriousness and effectiveness of BRICK's community relations.

While the survey turned out not to be very useful to the BAA leadership, there is no question that BRICK made an unusual effort to reach its students and families.

Also early on, the three kindergarten teachers planned a workshop for the parents of all 60 incoming five year-olds. This is a particularly good idea in a poor neighborhood where what to do when your child starts school might not be a topic of frequent conversation. And parents

can help a lot by reading stories, taking their child to the library (the Clinton branch is within walking distance), and following closely their classroom progress. Only three parents showed.

A survey taken in the second half of the school year asked teachers to judge how many of their colleagues "feel good about parents' support for their work?" Fifty-six percent answered "some," 20 percent answered "about half," and less than one-quarter thought that a majority or nearly all felt supported. No other question of 31 on the survey produced such a discouraging response.

The leadership of BAA takes this low level of family involvement seriously, but not as a top priority (recall that the School Governance Council operated without parent or community representatives). It believes that stronger family participation will help the school to succeed. This led Principal Haygood, to rename the parent teacher organization the Parents with Powerful Voices (PPV).

The first PPV meeting did not take place until March and drew ten parents, five staff members, and seven students. The agenda was to discuss general issues like parent participation, the roots of academic failure, and the need for more effective communications. Parents were encouraged to help students with homework assignments and to volunteer as "homeroom parents" to communicate with other parents and help teachers with activities like field trips.

More successful efforts are those that connect the parent much more directly to what their children are experiencing in the classrooms. For teachers, this can be an important, but time-consuming, addition to their responsibilities

A survey of 102 parents taken at a January/ February report card night indicated rave reviews for BAA on everything connected with academics and decent reviews on facilities and communications. Perhaps the most encouraging bit of evidence was not in the survey, but that 102 parents were present for a school event on a winter's night.

The pledge to deal with the "physical and emotional health" of the "whole student" is made tougher by the Avon Avenue neighborhood.

Home life is the biggest determinant of how kids perform in school. Parents set the table, kids follow along. Living with both biological parents, on average, helps enormously. Growing up with one parent, on average, increases greatly the chances that a child will spend at least a part of childhood in poverty. As discussed in Section One, growing up poor in a poor neighborhood compounds the effects of poverty.

BAA draws its kids from a poor, violent neighborhood. This increases the chances that a student's father will be in jail, that they live with a grandparent or in a foster home, and that their parent or guardian will not enjoy steady employment. It increases, too, the likelihood of witnessing violence, drug sales, or theft. Homes may be colder in winter, hotter in summer, and lack stable comfort and quiet all year. Television is likely to be more important than conversation and to be on almost continuously.

All of these factors make it harder for kids to concentrate on learning.

There is a lot of evidence that BRICK made noticeable changes in what happens in classrooms during 2010-11. There is less evidence that it was able to influence the home forces that affect physical and emotional health as well as academic performance.

Avon Avenue School offered extracurricular activities including chorus, Double-dutch, and basketball to which BRICK added flag football for grades 5-8. BRICK changed the rules: students must maintain academic progress and acceptable grades to participate. As a result, some students were not able to participate at a national Double-dutch competition (BAA came in fifth).

BRICK's investment in students and emphasis on shared ownership and responsibility was cited by Mrs. Haygood. She described "little things" that signal a cultural change in the BRICK Avon Academy. Her stories demonstrate positive shifts in school culture. "These things may not seem like much," said Haygood, "but they are HUGE shifts in the culture of the school."

SECTION EIGHT: Conclusions

Observers should be cautious making recommendations to those in the trenches day in and day out.

The Chad School Foundation case study was launched in January 2011. Half the school year had lapsed without outside observers making notes and asking questions. Information was collected via interviews with the BRICK team, NPS players, teachers and staff. Focus groups were held with all faculty members and surveys conducted with teachers and parents.. Classroom observations were conducted by an experienced teacher.

We have tried to tell an important story that is fair and accurate. But it is, like all stories, incomplete and subject to the storyteller's selection. Therefore, we will be careful to limit conclusions and recommendations.

First conclusion: BRICK has volunteered to take on a problem that very few have solved. No, it has volunteered for the most difficult professional challenge for any professional.

No one on the BRICK team had run a school before September 2010. Together, its six members had a total of about 38 years of experience in classrooms and school offices. Not a lot.

Here is what the BRICK team has that makes this an important story to tell:

- Moral outrage that years of failed effort are routinely accepted at the expense of poor kids in poor neighborhoods;
- Enthusiasm for tackling the most difficult of situations without the advantages of starting from scratch (as with charter schools) or picking their students (as with magnet schools);
- The energy to devote whatever time is needed to carry out the vision for BRICK Avon Academy;
- Acceptance that not everything will work out as planned, as in proposing to start off with only the K-2 grades and ending up with a K-8 school on day one;
- Smarts to make no unnecessary enemies and to cast a wide net for support. BRICK is not anti-union;
- Humility enough to recognize that adjustment to one's proposal is essential; and,
- Intensity of focus and effort to keep going.

Youthful enthusiasm is widely accepted in Silicon Valley and in the military, but not always in public education. BRICK tests the limits of acceptance.

Second conclusion: education's most difficult professional problem requires patience and humility.

Reform advocates sometimes simplify the cause of our problems and the ease with which they can be solved. Turn the heat up on teachers and principals and failed schools in poor neighborhoods will succeed. Give parents publically funded choices for schools, including private schools, and public schools will respond to the competition for money and start performing for poor kids. Turn failed schools over to management organizations and let them run them by their formulae and we'll see the achievement gap close.

No. A half-century of failed reforms should introduce some humility to the task of contending with concentrated poverty. BRICK is focusing on students that are five, six, seven, and eight years old for a reason. It will take at least four years before standardized tests can confirm if they are on the right track. The early evidence is encouraging, but the perspective outlined in Section One needs to be recalled before judgments are made.

Third conclusion: the Newark Public Schools should be credited with taking a chance on BRICK.

One could speculate that NPS is looking for scapegoats for the continued failure of South Ward schools. That would be unfair. Numerous high officials at 2 Cedar Street headquarters have extended themselves to make BRICK's endeavor a success beginning with Dr. Janey and his successor, Cami Anderson.

NPS is a bureaucracy more than it is an educational practitioner. It stood by for decades as successive superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, and supervisors watched as kids in the poorest neighborhoods struggled in vain to be educated well enough. It has the means to strangle efforts like BAA. Its leadership in the superintendent's office, HR, Facilities, and IT has extended a helping hand instead of a clenched fist.

Fourth conclusion: the results from BRICK's first year confirmed its focus on K-2 and on creating a collegial culture with its teachers.

Filling out a questionnaire or participating in a focus group is not a guarantee of candor, but the evidence is strong that BAA teachers have received well BRICK's efforts to create a collegial atmosphere.

The introduction of STEP confirmed the seriousness of BRICK's focus on K-2 literacy. In turn, STEP confirms that students in the K-2 grades made important progress. Intensity of focus, effort, and purpose count for more than the particular curriculum employed. BRICK brings intensity that has already paid off with BAA's third graders.

Fifth conclusion: More intensive early literacy produced significant, even dramatic, improvements in third grade reading and writing.

On the 2011 NJASK third grade language arts test, BAA students increased their proficiency rate by almost twenty percentage points over the 2010 cohort. This spike in performance cannot be explained by changes in the proficiency cut score, as Newark and DFGA students changed very little compared to the previous year. The possibility that this is a once-in-four-decade group of unusually talented 3rd graders exists, but is not likely. In 2011, the 3rd grade reduced the average gap with all Newark students from an average of 21 points to seven.

This is not to suggest that 35 percent proficiency is an acceptable goal or that it should encourage any complacency. With almost two of three third graders below grade level, the urgency to focus remains. It's just so much better than six out of seven as was the case in 2010.

One year's results do not conclude an argument, but this significant jump is in line with other more intensive efforts with younger students that have produced similar improvements in other urban districts. There are two other scores from the 2011 NJASK results that suggest that these improvements are a product of intensified instruction.

Sixth conclusion: BAA 3rd and 4th graders demonstrated significant jumps in their proficiency on the state math tests.

Recall that in the discussion of middle grades math performance at Avon Avenue School the question was raised if any intentional math instruction ever took place. The 2011 results on the 3rd and 4th grade math tests suggest that some focused teaching and learning occurred in 2010-11. Third graders increased proficiency by 13.5 percent to 51.7, but 4th graders improved over the previous year by 19.5. The gap between Avon and all NPS students was closed from an average of 17 percentage points on 3rd grade to just 7; 4th graders closed it from an average of 30 percentage points to just eleven.

Incidentally, 2011 marked the first time in at least three years that any grade on any math or literacy test at Avon had exceeded 50 percent proficiency.
One partial explanation for the improvement may be that the New Jersey math assessments include a number of open-ended questions that test one's writing ability as much as one's math competence. Improvements in basic literacy may have helped.

Seventh conclusion: BRICK has yet to figure out how to deal with its pledge to educate the whole child, to provide effective service and instruction for physical, emotional, family, and community well-being.

This is not a criticism, but an observation (confirmed by the BRICK team). Its primary obligation is to educate students so that they are on track to be given real choices and a high school diploma of value. Correctly, BRICK has focused almost exclusively on academics in the first year. It has a long way to go and not many inspiring examples to rely on.
The BRICK team is aware of the gap between pledge and delivery.

SECTION NINE: Recommendations

1. Work with NPS to find out why so many entering kindergarten students show no benefits from preschool.

To start, the NPS student database should capture for BAA (and other NPS schools) the record of preschool enrollment and attendance for rising kindergarteners. Kindergarten teachers should know which students attended which preschool provider for, and how long. For students that have at least one year of preschool, very few of them should be marked at "zero" on the STEP assessments (page 21).

If significant numbers of preschool "graduates" are scoring zero on STEP on the Fall assessment, the alarm bells should go off for a review of program quality by NPS and NJDOE. This could lead to a decision not to renew contracts with low-performing preschool providers.

It is possible that a large number of kindergarten students at BAA have not attended a preschool contracting with NPS and meeting NJDOE quality standards. If the Avon neighborhood is under-served, the question of expanding preschool services should be explored promptly. BRICK is exploring the possibility of opening a preschool to connect organically to its kindergarten.

2. Integrate the pedagogical practices of BAA's kindergarten with those of the sending preschool programs.

"Vertical alignment" is a term-of-craft in education. It captures the sensible objective to ensure that students are prepared academically for the next grade level. It needs to be done even for preschools.

In a residential neighborhood like one served by BAA, it is likely that most preschool graduates attend a nearby preschool. BAA kindergarten teachers should know what happens in the preschools feeding BAA and teachers in those preschools should know what kindergarten teachers expect and what/how they teach. The cross visitation should also lead to the sharing of a student's "portfolio," and the preschool teachers' observations and suggestions.

3. NPS should accelerate the development of the student-level database so that it is more useful to BRICK Avon Academy and all other NPS schools.

Over the past 15 years or so, the NPS has spent tens of millions of dollars developing a student-level database. It has little to show for the investment.

Here are minimal expectations from a functioning database that intersects with the pedagogical mission of every school:

- Enrollment information for preschool, NPS schools, SES after-school, and NPS summer programs;
- Quick turnaround of interim assessment data that provides every teacher and principal with results for all items tested. Longitudinal data for each student for both interim and summative tests;
- Comparative NJASK and HSPA results broken down to compare each NPS school by NCLB subgroup plus Continuously Enrolled Students (to show how well students continuously enrolled in the same school for at least three years compare with more recent entrants). If possible, NPS should provide results by attendance (those attending 170+ days v. 160 v. 150 days). The analysis should permit identification of comparative performance, for example, of black males or ex-English language learners. The district should compare NPS performance with other DFG A districts by subgroup;
- Student and teacher attendance and tardiness data.

The district should be able to produce district and school-level results that compare performance on NJASK3 LAL by those who attended preschool for one or two years compared to those who did not.

4. NPS needs to decide that its central office will or can be relevant to the fate of chronically-underperforming schools.

Lists of underperforming schools have been compiled in New Jersey for 40 years and for 40 years there is an almost guaranteed 40 percent rule. In any list of the 20, 50, or 100 lowest performing elementary schools, Camden and Newark's South Ward will count for 40 percent. At least the shorter the list, the higher the percentage.

Despite decades of evidence, NPS acts (or has acted) as if Ann Street and Avon Avenue schools are equals. It also acts as if it knows what to do. Neither is true.

NPS has the obligation to borrow from the best-performing districts and accept responsibility for all NPS schools. Union City, NJ and Montgomery County, MD come to mind as the places to start. For early literacy effectiveness, Elizabeth might be helpful.

Maybe the test for selecting the most effective pathway is to see if NPS can produce a working student database.

Trustees and Staff of the Chad School Foundation, Inc.

Dr. Kia Calhoun-Grundy, M.D.
Trinity Pediatrics, LLC
Chairwoman

Hon. William D. Payne
Member, New Jersey Amistad Commission
Vice-Chairman

Dr. Robert Curvin
Senior Fellow, Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy,
Rutgers University
Treasurer

Ms. Tynesha A. McHarris
Director, Programs and Community Engagement
Newark Education Trust
Secretary

Dr. Mark S. Johnson, M.D.
Dean
College of Medicine
Howard University
Trustee

Mr. William F. Williams
Teacher
Newark Public Schools
Trustee

Ms. Shane' Harris
Vice President
Prudential Foundation
Trustee

Ms. Michelle J. Diaz
Operations Manager
Rise Academy
Trustee

Staff

Reginald Lewis, Executive Director

Lawrence A. Munroe, Administrator
Jeffery Young, Program Associate