

# Going for the Gold

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Secrets of successful schools

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Public school leaders throughout the United States are approaching consensus about what it takes to educate all students well: more class time, smaller schools, a college preparatory curriculum, instructional coaching for teachers, and utilization of data to understand student needs. Yet results on the ground vary dramatically and remain, in large part, disappointing. Despite similar student demographics and budget constraints, a few schools report great results year after year, while many struggle. Why is it that some schools can sustain high graduation and college acceptance rates, while others, with the same basic design, have 50 percent dropout rates?

The Bridgespan Group is a nonprofit organization that works with other nonprofits and foundations on issues of strategy, philanthropy, and leadership. In our work with public school educators seeking to close the achievement gap for disadvantaged students, we have confronted this question often and have come to believe that the critical difference between schools that excel and schools that do not is the quality of execution. Leaders must be willing to make choices about what matters most and then “sweat the details” in aligning resources and effort behind those choices.

When a school is able to execute a good design successfully, everyone—leaders, teachers, administrators—agrees about what drives student achievement. Equally important, they do not allow their priorities to be sidetracked in the face of day-to-day pressures and pulls from other directions.

This article highlights the experiences of three education nonprofits with which Bridgespan has engaged: YES Prep Public Schools, KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), and Envision Schools. All three have school designs that incorporate the widely-agreed-upon elements mentioned above, and all three have achieved sustained results (YES Prep and KIPP for over a decade) on the dimension that matters most: their students’ performance. In addition, they have successfully replicated these results in multiple schools.

## **Design Is Necessary, but Insufficient**

It clearly matters that YES Prep, KIPP, and Envision schools are well designed, but many other districts and schools are also making good design choices. To achieve sustained success, commitment to the design needs to be followed up with consistent resource allocation decisions and well-crafted systems and processes that support the design intent. Leadership time spent “on task” is also an important factor. Too often, school leaders get bogged down by disciplinary, administrative, operational, and/or political issues and don’t have time to dedicate to the most important part of their school: what goes on in the classrooms. We have surveyed school leaders in a number of client organizations. At less successful schools, leaders spend less than one-quarter of their time on student learning, teacher professional development, and school culture. Leaders at more effective schools dedicate more than half of the day to these high-value activities.

Achieving that level of focus and the momentum that accompanies it is difficult, even when a school is new and has been created with a particular educational approach. When a school leader is attempting to turn around a poorly performing school, the task becomes even harder, although perhaps more critical. In poorly performing schools, there are usually more challenges to contend with, such as demoralized staff (which often leads to high turnover), increasing pressures from district staff to meet adequate yearly progress targets on standardized tests, and physical

environments that are poorly maintained and often unsafe. It can be enormously challenging to create a sense of urgency for change; identify a vision that a team can align behind; and ensure that school staff, students, parents, and key partners are ready, willing, and able to do the painful work of changing expectations and behavior.

In this larger context, the issues faced by the leaders at KIPP, YES Prep, and Envision, all three of them charter organizations, may differ on some dimensions from those of their peers in district schools (see Figure 1). The potential for distraction, however, is equally great. Our case studies illustrate what it looks like to establish and maintain a focus on what matters most in practice at these three organizations. These schools are succeeding in creating a culture in which student learning is central and the immediate (or comfortable) does not trump the important. Their strategies for executing their school designs are instructive for all public school leaders.

### **YES Prep Public Schools**

YES Prep was conceived in 1995 by a group of teachers, parents, and community leaders as a program within an existing school. In 1998, under the leadership of teacher Chris Barbic, they opened their first school. Today, YES Prep is an open-enrollment public school organization that serves 2,100 predominantly low-income (80 percent) and minority (95 percent Latino or African-American) middle- and high-school students at five schools in Houston, Texas. Most students enter YES Prep schools one or more grade levels behind in math and English.

Over its history, the organization has achieved remarkable outcomes: 100 percent of YES Prep graduates have been accepted to four-year colleges, and YES Prep schools consistently rank among the best on the Texas state standardized tests. In 2006, and again in 2007, YES Prep ranked among the “Top 100 High Schools in America” in *Newsweek* magazine.

YES Prep schools are rooted in the belief that what matters most to the success of students in high school, college, and beyond is the quality of their interactions with teachers. So for YES Prep, the priority is recruiting, developing, and retaining teachers who are committed to doing “whatever it takes” (the YES Prep motto) to prepare students to graduate from a four-year college.

“When we started with the first school, we had 17 teachers,” Chief Academic Officer Jennifer Pagani reflected during a recent interview. “Those teachers were incredibly, intensely dedicated to their craft—really thoughtful and spirited practitioners. And looking back at that first year, it seemed to us that it was all about the teaching. It was about how the teachers interacted with the students, and it was about the standards that the teachers set for students to meet. We got results, so we figured that’s what we needed to focus on.”

As they thought about building on their experience, however, she and Barbic also realized that it would be a challenge to sustain their success, let alone replicate it. The trick would be to find (and keep) the large number of mission-aligned educators who would make the commitment to YES Prep. “We realized that in order to preserve the intensity of instruction that we had in the school, we needed to figure out teacher development and retention,” says Pagani.

They also felt strongly that leaders of YES Prep schools would have to be great teachers, groomed from within the organization.

### **Sweating the Details**

To that end, Barbic and Pagani began to invest time and resources on recruiting and developing teachers. The approach, which is constantly being honed, begins with rigorous, and increasingly

scientific, selection and includes extensive ongoing support and training once they hire a teacher.

“We used to hire people who looked great on paper and were passionate,” Pagani explains, “but there was still more attrition than we wanted to see, and inconsistent results. So we worked with a psychologist to develop a personality profile of an ideal YES Prep teacher. We did this looking at our most successful teachers based on the results they got with their students. We also looked at subjective inputs, including how they interacted with students. And we came up with the seven personality traits that really define a YES Prep teacher [see table]. If you’re not hitting five of the seven, you’re not right for this program.”

Candidates also teach during the recruiting process. “We ask them to do a lesson plan. And then they teach in front of our students. We get to see what things they prioritize, and the kind of rapport they develop with students. And it gives us a sense of what they value as teachers.”

Professional development for YES Prep teachers begins before they ever enter the classroom, and once started, it never really stops. At its core is a strong teacher-coaching staff, which represents a major investment of time and money. Each YES Prep school has two dedicated coaches on staff who support about 10 teachers each. And as with teacher recruiting, YES Prep is constantly refining its approach to coaching. Early on, coaches met on a regular schedule with all of the teachers they were supporting. But as time passed, Pagani and Barbic recognized that new teachers in particular needed an even higher level of hands-on support. “We’ve started trying some alternative scheduling,” Pagani explains, “so that our coaches go to work with a single teacher for three or four days straight, modeling lessons, watching lessons, providing immediate feedback, helping with lesson planning, and then coming in the next day as well.”

In addition, YES Prep has been creating a teacher handbook that is a living document constantly under revision. YES Prep teachers have created evaluation rubrics that provide them, and observers, with a pragmatic guide for what YES Prep teaching should look like in the classroom.

YES Prep aligns people, resources, and time around developing great teachers. School directors play a vital role in this effort. Directors are all former YES teachers, and they are groomed as classroom leaders and school culture builders. Once in the role, school directors continue to teach to stay connected to the classroom; they also set priorities so that they can spend the majority of their day observing classrooms and coaching teachers. From the beginning, Barbic created systems that would enable school leaders to focus on student learning and teacher development. For example, the disciplinary system distributes day-to-day enforcement responsibilities across the staff and, in some cases, among the students themselves. This arrangement enables school leaders to focus on what matters most.

YES Prep leaders have made difficult choices to maintain their priority focus on teachers. They increased total school enrollment and average class sizes in order to fit additional instructional resources into the budget. They also cut costs in their extracurricular programs and sought ways to keep facilities, transportation, and other non-classroom costs from dominating the budget.

“Not to say that you can’t get results any other way, but for us, it started out being about excellent teaching—and spending a lot of time on the development of materials for teaching, and on the art of teaching,” Pagani explains. “That’s what we did, and it worked, so that’s what we’re going to stick with.”

### **KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program)**

Teach For America alums Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin created the Knowledge Is Power Program in 1994 with the goal of improving academic outcomes for underserved students. But they based

KIPP on the idea that the key to creating and sustaining a successful school is leadership. As Feinberg puts it, “Instructional strategy, funding, and curriculum are important concerns, but they don’t make or break a school. The leader does.”

Armed with this shared belief and the confidence that they could lead, Feinberg and Levin launched KIPP as a 5th-grade public school program in inner-city Houston, Texas. Then in 1995, Feinberg remained in Houston and Levin returned home to New York City to establish KIPP in the South Bronx. “We were in horrible buildings; we didn’t have any money; we weren’t using the same curriculum,” Feinberg recalls. “But those things really weren’t essentials.” What was essential was Feinberg’s and Levin’s ability to motivate teachers and influence what went on in the classrooms, from determining curriculum to selecting and managing teachers.

By 1999, the schools were performing at the top of their districts. That same year, the CBS News television show *60 Minutes* featured KIPP, which drew the attention of Doris and Donald Fisher, founders of Gap, Inc. The Fishers invested \$15 million to form the KIPP Foundation, with a goal of replicating KIPP schools nationwide for the country’s neediest children. The KIPP Foundation focuses its efforts on recruiting, training, and supporting outstanding teachers to become school leaders and on opening new, locally run KIPP schools in high-need communities.

The KIPP Foundation provided a platform for Feinberg and Levin to test their approach on a larger scale. To do so, they had to articulate the KIPP design more fully. The first two schools each had their individual styles and strengths. How could that translate into a replicable formula?

In tackling this task, Feinberg says, they “backed into” the five essential tenets of the KIPP model: High Expectations (for academic achievement and conduct); Choice and Commitment (KIPP students, parents, and teachers all sign a learning pledge, promising to devote the time and effort needed to succeed); More Time (extended school day, week, and year); Power to Lead (school leaders have significant autonomy, including control over their budget, personnel, and culture); and Focus on Results (scores on standardized tests and other objective measures are coupled with a focus on character development).

Articulating these five tenets was a significant step toward formalizing the KIPP model. But what mattered most was, and is, putting a strong leader in each school. As Feinberg puts it, “If we truly do a great job of recruiting and selecting a leader for a school, then technically we’re done. The school will be successful. Any training or help we can give would be nice, but it’s not necessary. The leader is going to find a way to do it.”

### **Sweating the Details**

To ensure that the right school leaders are selected and that those leaders have every opportunity to hone their skills before taking on a school, the KIPP Foundation has invested heavily in leader recruiting and training. The KIPP School Leadership Program is a yearlong effort that includes a four-week intensive training session (originally offered through UC Berkeley’s Haas School of Business and now located at the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute), residencies at other KIPP schools, and support from experienced KIPP staff. The program attracts applicants from organizations across the country. KIPP chooses its school leaders from among the graduates, evaluating candidates on 11 competencies that include critical thinking, communication skills, key personal attributes, and prior experience with disadvantaged students.

The KIPP Foundation helps each new school leader and location secure facilities and a charter, and build a strong board. Once a school opens, the foundation provides professional development opportunities to the growing network of KIPP teachers, school leaders, and support staff through content retreats and the weeklong KIPP School Summit. But decisionmaking, including curriculum,

faculty selection, budgeting, and all other local-level details, is left to the school leader and the local board of directors.

KIPP has grown substantially since receiving the initial KIPP Foundation grant. As of this writing, there are 57 KIPP schools (including elementary, middle, and high schools) in 17 states and Washington, D.C., serving more than 14,000 students. Almost all are public charter schools. Students who entered KIPP schools in 2005 achieved the largest academic gains made in the 10 years since KIPP began.

In 2006, Richard Barth became CEO of the KIPP Foundation. Under his leadership, the foundation has begun to cluster KIPP schools in certain areas. These clusters each have a superintendent who works with school leaders and the KIPP Foundation. According to Barth, “The benefits of growth through localized scale are compelling. Not only are local superintendents of KIPP schools better positioned than our national staff to identify and groom local talent and ensure long-term sustainability; the pooling and sharing of support services allows the energy and time of our school leaders to remain focused on the highest-value activities: working with faculty, students, and families.” This is in stark contrast to many districts, where principals are overburdened with administrative activities.

Outside of the school inspection process that the KIPP Foundation conducts, the schools are accountable for their own results and school culture. “If they want to have someone heading up instructional leadership, that’s their prerogative,” Feinberg says. “It’s like being a head football coach. If their specialty is defense, they might not need a defensive coordinator. A great leader knows where his or her strengths are and where the holes are....I don’t think there’s ‘one way’ to do it. It’s up to them. We look at the test scores at the end of the year.”

## **Envision Schools**

In the late 1990s, Bob Lenz was teaching at the Sir Francis Drake High School in San Anselmo, California, working on new approaches to educating students. “We had been experimenting with breaking up the school into learning communities, we called them ‘academies,’ and we were doing a lot of project-based, interdisciplinary learning,” Lenz explains. The idea was that the material the students were learning in one class—science, say—could be integrated with the work they were doing in other classes.

The approach was successful; in 1999, Drake was named a New American High School and featured in *U.S. News & World Report*. The problem, Lenz says, was that he “kept hearing how project-based learning was nice for wealthy, suburban kids, but, ‘kids in urban settings aren’t going to be able to do this kind of work.’”

Project-based, interdisciplinary learning requires teaching teams to integrate a theme or project into rigorous lesson plans from a variety of disciplines, and to coordinate delivery among teachers and across classrooms so that projects progress apace and students meet curriculum goals. This approach presents numerous day-to-day challenges and demands aligned systems for instructional leadership and coaching. “I saw places where this work was being done,” Lenz says, “and it wasn’t sustainable because the systems pushed against it.”

Determined to create a system in which his innovative instructional approach would work for disadvantaged children, Lenz co-founded Envision Schools with Daniel McLaughlin in 2001. As of this writing, Envision operates four San Francisco Bay Area high schools that serve predominantly first-generation college-bound and low-income students. The young organization has already achieved notable success: in 2005 its first campus, Marin School of Arts and Technology (MSAT), was the highest-performing school in its district on California’s academic performance index (API).

That same year, Envision’s second campus, City Arts & Tech High School (CAT), had the highest API gain in the San Francisco Unified School District, and it was rated as one of 12 exemplary schools in the nation by the U.S. Department of Education. In the 2006–7 school year, MSAT, CAT, and Envision’s third campus, Metropolitan Arts & Tech High School (Metro), outperformed the state average on the percentage of 10th-grade students passing the California High School Exit Exam.

Not surprisingly, what matters most at Envision—the focal point of execution—is its instructional system, which requires a team of teachers, facilitative leadership, high-quality analytical tools, and expert support. “We use a triangle to describe what we have,” says Lenz (see Figure 2). The first point of the triangle is ensuring that students master the content. The second is having them be able to demonstrate their knowledge, in the form of a project, such as a short documentary—something that requires presentation. For example, a student might do research on an environmental issue in a science class, create a public service announcement about the issue in a digital media class, and write a persuasive paper about it in English language arts. The third point of the triangle is building in a way to chart students’ progress over time and having them reflect on what they have learned and how. The idea is to create a tangible context for everything a student learns, so that it has meaning and resonates over time.

### **Sweating the Details**

In aligning resources and people to achieve results for students, Envision’s leaders started with their own positions. The organization’s executive leadership is a partnership of two CEOs—the chief executive officer (McLaughlin) and the chief education officer (CEdO, Lenz).

“We designed the instructional model first, and then started thinking about how we would create a business model to support it,” Lenz explains. “We knew that we had to have a CEO, but we didn’t want the educational model to become subservient to the organization’s operations, so we chose the education officer title for balance. It creates a healthy tension, and as we’ve brought in people on one side, we bring someone in on the other side to maintain the balance.”

Envision invested up front in a dedicated team to deploy and refine its model. This investment meant that schools would need to be situated in lower-cost locations and that ancillary afterschool programs would need to be kept to a minimum. Further, Envision made the decision not to provide transportation and food services.

Lenz and Director of Instruction Jeannette LaFors spend much of their time working with schools: meeting weekly with school principals and teachers at their campuses, analyzing and reflecting on results, building out Envision’s professional development programs, and working with teachers to create tools that can support projects. “Our expectation is that teachers jointly will be designing projects that make them interdependent,” says LaFors, whose core responsibility is facilitating teacher teams. “That’s very different than in traditional schools, where teachers often work in silos, responsible solely for their own areas.”

Lenz, LaFors, and the teaching teams at each school spend time every week reviewing student results and sharing classroom observations to reflect on and enhance their practice. This time is built into the school schedule, and the associated financial cost of having the full teaching team together is prioritized in the budget.

One of the most visible signs of Envision’s commitment to sweating the details of its instructional system is student “exhibitions.” “They speak to the collective responsibility the teachers have for the students,” Lenz explains. “Students will tell you about how rigorous and rewarding exhibitions are. Teachers will tell you the same thing.”

As Envision has matured as an organization, its leaders have had to address the realities on the ground to maintain their focus on what matters most. When the organization was still in its early stages, for example, they realized principals were spending a significant amount of time on facilities procurement and maintenance and very little time in classrooms. So this year Envision took the job off of the school leaders' plate by adding a facilities manager centrally and, as of this writing, is looking at adding an operations manager at each school. At the same time, Envision reset expectations for instructional leadership among principals supported by new professional development and tools developed by the instructional leadership team.

### **What Works**

YES Prep, KIPP, and Envision illustrate the central thesis that quality execution—deciding what matters most and sweating the details—underlies strong results for students. Their school designs incorporate many of the same elements that other educators and policymakers are now embracing. The “innovation” at YES Prep, KIPP, and Envision—the differentiator that sets them apart—is the effort expended on the day-to-day leadership and management challenges.

All three align money, people, and leadership time to their most important activities. All three are building systems that translate general concepts into specific, repeatable actions that ensure quality execution throughout the organization. Finally, they move quickly to make changes when things aren't working as planned.

As we consider the national challenge of providing a quality education to all children, whatever their starting point, we need to address not only matters of educational structure and policy, but also—and critically—the on-the-ground execution required to improve teaching and learning every day, in tens of thousands of classrooms. To obtain the best possible results for students, school leaders must have the mandate, the support, and the discipline to maintain a relentless focus on what matters most.

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