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One student at a time: How an innovative charter school succeeds with dropout recovery

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One student at a time: How an innovative charter school succeeds with dropout recovery

Abstract

In this paper, the authors examine how a charter high school in a large upper-Midwest city is successfully serving students who have not succeeded in the traditional school system and are in danger of experiencing the school-to-prison pipeline. The school accomplishes this through its enactment of five key qualities: 1. A casual, family-like atmosphere; 2. Commitment to a small, close-knit community; 3. Creative responses to absenteeism; 4. Extreme patience and flexibility in the classroom; 5. Innovative, trade-focused programs. The authors also examine the central challenges the school faces as it works to serve this group effectively. The paper describes an overarching model for serving adolescents who have had adverse childhood experiences (ACES) – a philosophy and practice of pedagogical and institutional plasticity.

Keywords

school-to-prison pipeline, dropout prevention, adverse childhood experiences, adolescents, trauma

Introduction

Our number one preference is [to enroll] kids who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out. There wouldn't be a purpose for our school if the kids were succeeding somewhere else. (Little Metro High School director, founder, and teacher)

This study is one of a series (Basford, Lewis, & Trout, 2020) focusing on schools that use non-traditional approaches to reach students who have not succeeded in the traditional system. Little Metro High School (a pseudonym) first appeared on our radar when we visited it as part of a guided clinical experience for students in our teacher education program. We were impressed by the staff's clear commitment to serving students through a family-like atmosphere and flexible pedagogical approaches. Looking further into the school, we discovered that it graduates an impressive 60-70 students a year, averaging about 85% of its senior students, many of whom were at high risk for dropping out before finding Little Metro. In addition to meeting state graduation standards, these students develop individualized plans for post-secondary success. The school has purposely remained small and inconspicuous, but in education circles it has built a strong reputation for serving "at risk" teens.

The initial idea for Little Metro came about when the founders saw a disturbing number of teenagers giving up on school. The director explains, "We saw a lot of kids quitting and a pretty significant group who were not happy. We literally followed them out the door and asked, 'Why are you leaving?' They told us, 'Nobody knows me.' They felt uncomfortable in a crowd." What followed was a pilot program designed specifically to serve students who were not happy in the large, traditional system: a small school where people *really* knew each other. The plan emerged just as the state's charter school legislation was coming out, so the founders opted for a charter school approach (controversial at the time), because it provided the best way for them to maintain local control over the school's program. The director explains:

Mary: We started with the kids who were walking out of other schools and just encouraged them to give this new program a try. Initially, we thought that we wouldn't be around for very long. I mean, look how fun this is. It keeps kids in and it really creates a family atmosphere for students and teachers. We figured that everyone would start doing this, at least for those kids who were leaving the bigger schools. But we're still here. Today, we don't do any recruiting. Kids find us now and we always have a waiting list. (school director, founder, and teacher)

Demographically, the school has consistently reflected the makeup of the surrounding neighborhood, which has changed over the years. The initial group was mainly Latinx and African-American students. Today, Hmong Americans make up the biggest population, followed by Latinx students, African-American students, and smaller groups of White and Native students. Unlike many city charters which attracts students from a wider area, Little Metro has always drawn from the west side of the city. Students tend to be in the 17-21 age range, which means that they have often missed the "graduate on time" target set by the state. Over 95% qualify for free and reduced lunch and close to half have been diagnosed with special needs.

What brings these specific students to the school? Our findings will detail how large, traditional schools were too cold and put up too many roadblocks. At Little Metro, these students thrive in a small community that is able to surround them with support and respond to the

challenges they face in their daily lives, such as homelessness, needing to work to pay the bills, or having kids to care for. Our study reveals that many students at Little Metro have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and benefit from teachers who are knowledgeable about trauma-informed practices. Some students have also been in and out of the juvenile detention system and are at high risk for experiencing the school-to-prison pipeline.

In our literature review below, we frame the study by examining recent research on the school-to-prison pipeline, adverse childhood experiences (ACES), trauma informed practices, dropout prevention, and alternative education.

Literature Review

Michelle Alexander's (2012) seminal work *The New Jim Crow* has highlighted a steady increase in U.S. incarceration rates, which have grown from around 300,000 in the 1970's to well over 2 million today. Alexander and Bryan Stevens (2013) have documented a dramatic increase in drug-related arrests and convictions that have targeted low-income communities of color almost exclusively. In the same way that poor men of color are targeted for arrest and incarceration on a societal level, boys and young men of color are in greater danger of experiencing disproportionate discipline and exclusionary or repressive punishment in schools (Noguera, 2008; Heitzeg, 2009). Young men of color often get labeled as "problem kids" or "bad boys" early on in school; they get pushed out of mainstream classrooms, experience suspension and expulsion at much higher rates, and often wind up in the school-to-prison pipeline (Lewis & Basford, 2014; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Nocella, Parmar, & Stovall, 2013). Though it affects males at higher rates, the phenomenon is not exclusive to young men. Young women of color and high-poverty students are also at higher risk for experiencing the school-to-prison-pipeline (Morris, 2018; Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). Ironically, we dole out the most severe discipline to those kids who are most in need of support. They tend to come from single-parent homes and live in poverty; some live in foster homes; many are homeless. Instead of supporting these youth, mainstream schools have used "zero-tolerance" as an excuse to give up on them.

A growing body of evidence has also pointed to the impact of prolonged stress and trauma on the lives of young people (Sciaraffa, Zeanah, & Zeanah, 2017; Bornstein, 2013; Ganzel & Morris, 2011). This research suggests that standard responses to negative behavior in schools (namely, the zero-tolerance approach of publicly calling out misbehavior and doling out increasing levels of punishment) is, in fact, part of the problem. In our efforts to "hold kids accountable," we often punish them for behaviors that are out of their control and may even be natural responses to childhood trauma or high degrees of stress. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as physical or emotional abuse, domestic violence, drug or alcohol addiction in the home, or having a household member in prison can lead to negative health outcomes and negative performance in school (Stevens, 2018).

Research on ACEs suggests that schools and teachers can play an important role in easing student anxiety and depression, improving their coping skills and self-confidence, and helping them build a sense of self-worth (Stopa, Barrett, & Golingi, 2010; Blitz & Saastamoinen, 2016). The negative effects of ACEs can be counteracted with "resilience promoting environments" that center on "protective caregiving relationships," both at home and in school (Woods-Jaeger, Cho, Sexton, Slagel, & Goggin, 2018, p. 1). This has led to the creation of trauma sensitive schools, where staff are trained in how to help traumatized children learn. Much of this work has

centered on early childhood and elementary level learning (Sciaraffa et al., 2017), though ACEs can have a “strong and cumulative impact” on adolescents and adults (Minnesota Department of Health, 2011). There is a dearth of research on what schools can be doing to serve *adolescent* students with ACEs.

Trauma informed teaching practices focus on how teachers relate to students who have experienced exclusion and failure in conventional school settings. Not only do teachers seek to understand how previous experiences might influence current learning habits, they also intentionally prioritize building relationships of trust and safety as an essential first step in helping students find pathways to success (Morgan, Pendergast, Brown, & Heck, 2015). A mutually respectful and caring relationship forms the basis for re-engagement with school and making progress toward graduation.

Current research on dropout prevention reinforces these same core ideas. Among the most common reasons for dropping out: stressful life events (another way to describe ACEs); frequent suspensions and expulsions (or disproportionate discipline); poor attendance; and teachers being perceived as not caring about students (Freeman, 2013). Wilkins and Bost (2015) emphasize the following interventions as most effective at reducing dropout rates: providing adult advocates for students; personalizing the learning environment; and individualizing instruction. In one exploratory case study (Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, & Reno, 2013), student participants consistently expressed their desire for a smaller school size, schedule flexibility, and an individualized approach to learning. These are traits that Little Metro’s director would describe as “common sense,” since they fulfill the basic human needs of being recognized as an individual *and* belonging to a supportive community.

Because it is a charter school that takes non-traditional approaches to reaching students, Little Metro falls into the broad category of “alternative education.” Conley (2002) argues that “there are probably as many different definitions of alternative education as there are alternative programs” (p. 4) and describes the wide range of philosophies, curricula, and pedagogical practices that now fall under this umbrella term. For the purposes of this study, our interest is in alternative programs that target high school dropouts. More specifically, we are interested in programs that serve students through the use of innovative programming and flexible pedagogical approaches. We would contrast these programs directly with the more compliance-oriented, authoritarian model of the no-excuses schools, which Stahl (2019) has critiqued for their tendency to regulate and surveil the behaviors and bodies of low-income students of color, not unlike prisons.

Several recent studies have documented the success of relationship-based, student-centered approaches when working with adolescents in alternative settings. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) interviewed at-risk students attending alternative schools and found that students particularly appreciated the more personalized relationships they developed with their teachers. Freedman (2018) documents the positive impact of forgiveness education on at-risk youth, an approach which has helped adolescents who have experienced trauma and personal injury to cope with anger and build empathy. Vander Ark (2019) identifies a series of alternative high school programs across the country that are successfully serving students who have not succeeded in the traditional system. The Bronx Arena High School, for example, serves over-aged, under-credited students who have dropped out. Their program focuses on relationship building and pairing each student with an advocate counselor to design a self-paced personalized plan. Similarly, Da Vinci Rise High serves students in Los Angeles by helping them to address challenges such as foster care, housing instability, and probation. The school uses a flex-schedule

for classes, allowing students to recover credits while honoring the importance of home and family needs. The school also works directly with youth development agencies to provide counseling, tutoring, and job training for its students.

The schools described above emphasize innovative, flexible programming for serving students who have been pushed out of traditional schools. We examine Little Metro as another example of this type of alternative program. Our study builds evidence that a charter high school with an innovative, flexible dropout recovery program can and does make a difference.

One of the authors first visited Little Metro with our teacher licensure students to learn more about its mission and innovative programming. After spending several semesters at the school, and learning more about its impressive graduation rates, we came to see that Little Metro was intentionally and successfully interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and we wanted to learn more. Specifically, we sought answers to the following questions: How do staff and students describe their experiences at Little Metro and how do those experiences differ from traditional settings? What specific school practices appear to be successful for students at Little Metro? What challenges does the school face? We also sought to discover what aspects of the school's approach might be applicable in other settings.

Methods, Data Collection, and Analysis

We designed an interpretive study (Merriam, 1998) to better understand how Little Metro keeps students motivated and engaged to stay in school and graduate. The study draws on interview data and observations. Primary participants were teachers (n=11 out of 15 total), including the school director, who also teaches. Teacher participants were selected based on the director's recommendation, our observations, and interest in the study. Secondary participants (n=10) were students. All student participants had attended different K-12 schools before coming to Little Metro. They were selected based on availability and interest in the study. We conducted eight open-ended, 1-2 hour individual interviews with school staff and two focus group interviews with students. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis. We also visited the school over 20 times, observing both classroom and school-wide activities to broadly understand the nature of the school experience.

Using interview transcripts and notes from observations, we followed Merriam's (1998) guidelines—perusing the data multiple times, coding recurring words and phrases, and eventually creating thematic categories. This analysis was shared with study participants to validate our findings and involve participants in the interpretation process.

Findings: Key Qualities of Little Metro High School

In what follows, we describe five key qualities of Little Metro High School that we believe lead to success with students. These include: 1. A casual, family-like atmosphere; 2. Commitment to a small, close-knit community; 3. Creative responses to absenteeism; 4. Extreme patience and flexibility in the classroom; 5. Innovative, trade-focused programs.

Quality #1: A casual, family-like atmosphere: Lunch at a Little Metro is a communal event. With rare exceptions, everyone in the building gathers in a central location to sit at small, circular tables and share a homemade meal, served family-style. The school chef, a former student known for his skill at making pizza and maintaining a fresh salad bar, tries to keep the menu healthy and local. When we joined in, the atmosphere reminded us of summer camp. Every

table had at least one teacher and 4 or 5 students chatting quietly. People lingered after they had finished eating, bussed tables together and swept the floors, then wandered off to afternoon classes without any formal reminder.

Contrast this with a large traditional high school and you will get a sense of what makes the atmosphere at Little Metro unique. In a large school cafeteria, students wait in long lines to get institutionalized food. They are expected to eat quickly and move along. Hired staff, whose primary function is crowd control, stand in strategic locations around the room. And there just tends to be a general feeling of anxiety in the air, where something could easily go wrong (an argument, a food fight, harassment, or violence). This is precisely the type of atmosphere that Little Metro students are seeking to escape and Little Metro teachers are hoping to counteract with a radically casual and personalized approach to school. Teachers explain:

Leah: We listen to each other and respect where people come from and what they have to say. A lot of our students came from schools where they did not feel connected, so we really try to have a warm, friendly atmosphere. We eat together. We joke together.
(White female math teacher)

Oliver: We try to get to know our students on a personal level. We all use first names. We each have 10-15 advisees that we are personally in charge of, so we get to know them really well. That helps create a warm environment. (White male science teacher)

Anna: The environment here is very accepting. It's a family. We care about each other and respect each other. If someone decides not to go along with that, we don't just kick them out. We talk to them about it and try to work it out. (White female art teacher)

As Anna's comment suggests, the school also uses a highly individualized approach to discipline. "We spent our first year working with students to come up with a set of rules," explains the school director. "Eventually, we boiled it down to two words: respect and communication. That has been our 'rule book' ever since. If someone feels disrespected, we talk about it." Discipline is handled on a case-by-case basis, with those involved sitting down to talk through the situation and arrive at a logical solution together, an informal program of restorative justice. Teachers try to frame everything as a choice that students are free to make, including the very basic decision of whether or not to come to school. Teachers are also quick to point out that discipline is not much of an issue at the school.

Leah: There just aren't a lot of power struggles. We don't have situations where the teacher says, 'Do this or else.' It's more like, 'We're here to support each other, and if you're making certain choices, then you may not get the outcome you're looking for.'
(White female math teacher)

Emily: Honestly, we have very few discipline challenges. We're kind of a big family. People are proud to be here, so they tend not to act out. (White female art teacher)

The relaxed atmosphere appears to have greatly reduced the number of discipline challenges. The few incidents that do arise are comparatively easy to address, since students are choosing to be there and are welcome to leave at any time (in the same way that no one gets kicked out of

Little Metro, no one is ever forced to stay). Meanwhile, senior students play an important role in helping to acclimate their newer peers. “It’s sort of fun to hear the more experienced students say to the newer ones, ‘We don’t do that here’ or ‘That’s not what we’re about,’” says the school director. Even students who might consider themselves “enemies” outside of school, because of gang or neighborhood affiliation, tend to leave their disagreements at the door. One teacher explains:

Steve: We have young people here from different groups that don’t get along outside of school. At night, they’re on opposite sides of the street. But when they’re here at school or on the work site, they’re supporting each other, laughing, shaking hands. (White male, Youth Build leader)

A student summarizes how Little Metro changed her life:

Che: At my old school, I got into fights and got kicked out. I stopped caring about my education. I was ditching school. No one cared if I graduated. When I came here, the teachers were so energetic and caring. It made me feel wanted, part of a family. Honestly, this school saved my life. (Asian-American female, senior)

That family-like atmosphere is possible, in part, because the school is committed to remaining small.

Quality #2: Commitment to a small, close-knit community: Teachers consistently emphasized the school’s small size as a key component of its identity and success. Class sizes are capped at 12 and are often as small as 5 to 10. Co-taught classes, which are common, are capped at 20, though they tend to run in the 10 to 15 range. The small class size makes it possible for teachers to build close relationships with students and individualize their instruction and curriculum. The total population of the school is also kept low. “We’ve made a conscious decision to max out at 115,” says the school director. “That was student designed. When we’ve gone above that number in the past, students told us, ‘No, it doesn’t feel the same.’” The commitment to stay small comes at a price, since the school depends on the state’s per-pupil funding as its primary source of income. Facility costs are kept as low as possible and extra-curricular opportunities are limited, but both teachers and students see many benefits:

Anna: Our small size allows for much more individualized learning. It’s a real luxury. I always have a project focus to my classes. With a small class, let’s say 8 students, they can each be doing different projects and it works well. (White female, art teacher)

James: In a traditional setting, you have 30+ kids in a classroom and they’ve been in that setting for 8-10 years. Their mindset is so different. They’ve gotten used to being ignored. When they come here, some students have a hard time adjusting [to that attention]. But once they do, they realize this is a good place. We’re not trying to be your problem. We’re trying to be your solution. We’re trying to be there with you. (Asian-American math teacher)

Leah: Our biggest advantage is that we’re very small and that just leads to all kinds of possibilities. We’re able to ask: What does this one person need? What’s the best

schedule for this student? Which teachers are they going to work best with? And then we can adjust in response to that need. (White female math teacher)

The students we spoke to and interacted with agreed that small size and personal attention is a major part of Little Metro's appeal. "At my old school, I felt like I wasn't getting the help I needed," says one student (an African-American male). "With so many kids, teachers can't help you. Here they have small classes and really help you."

Above, we have emphasized some of the positive qualities of Little Metro. One major challenge the school faces is absenteeism. Teachers try to face this challenge with creativity and patience.

Quality # 3: Creative responses to erratic attendance and absenteeism: Teachers at Little Metro consistently identify erratic attendance and absenteeism as their primary challenge. For a variety of reasons, students are often unable or unwilling to attend class every day. In more traditional settings, this creates a major barrier to success, since students are dropped from classes or expelled because of poor attendance. The following teacher comments are representative of what we heard about absenteeism:

Leah: A lot of students come in with serious truancy issues, for various reasons: they may have a kid; they may be homeless; they may have a job that their family is really depending on. Or maybe they just don't have any excitement about going to school and they have a history of not being interested. (White female math teacher)

Cheryl: We have a lot of kids who have challenges in their lives besides school. Some students have had some terrible experiences in education, and they've become distrustful of teachers and the system. (Asian-American female social studies teacher)

Instead of addressing absenteeism with punishment, Little Metro has designed a unique system that makes it possible for students to earn a diploma even when their attendance is inconsistent. As students realize that graduation is possible, attendance tends to improve. The school tries to focus on incentives to attend, rather than penalties for being absent. Below, we outline some of their creative responses to the challenge of erratic attendance.

Capstones, not credits: Traditional schools use credits to represent progress toward graduation, and seat time (i.e., attendance) is often necessary to earn those credits. In contrast, Little Metro uses a system of capstones based on student competencies. Instead of sitting in class and completing a series of worksheets and tests over a semester, students must demonstrate what they know through individualized projects called capstones. "In our system," explains an advisor, "it's not a matter of seat time. It's about the quality of the project. When they've completed it and have shown us that they have that competency, then they have earned the capstone. One capstone might take a week or a year, depending on the student." Ideally, students come to realize over time that they can complete more capstones if they attend regularly and make progress on their various projects.

To graduate, students must complete 26 capstones, most of them rooted in state graduation standards (in math, communication, science, etc.). As part of the graduation process, they must also demonstrate that they have explored post-secondary options – whether educational, career-focused, or both – and develop a plan-of-action. The school focuses on

helping each student prepare for his or her specific future, which may involve college, technical school, or a job.

Short sessions, not semesters: Instead of traditional semesters, Little Metro schedules ten shorter sessions over the course of the year, ranging from three to six weeks long. Shorter sessions make it possible for students to dip in and out of school, depending on their needs and preferences, while still making progress toward graduation. Teachers explain:

Leah: For a lot of our students, the stamina required for a nine-month class is challenging, so we take it in smaller chunks. Students feel like they've made some progress and can start fresh with something new six weeks later. (White female math teacher)

Emily: As long as they are here and getting the work done, students can make good progress in each session. If a student only makes it to half of a session, they probably won't complete that capstone, but they can keep working on it the next session. (White female art teacher)

Rather than using a zero-sum game, where students fail and must begin again, there is a sense of continual progress. If students reach the end of a session and have not finished a capstone, they can continue working independently or sign up for the same class again (without having to start over completely).

Use of technology: More recently, teachers have begun to use technologies such as Google classroom to keep students connected, even when they miss class. A social studies teacher explains:

Cheryl: We shifted to Google classroom and one-to-one technology and that has felt like a real game changer. When I have an in-class activity, I'm trying to make it engaging and I'm adjusting to meet everyone's needs. But if you're not in class, then you miss out. So I also try to have a pretty straightforward assignment on google classroom that matches whatever we did in class. (Asian-American female social studies teacher)

Teachers admit that they would prefer to see students in person and actively participating, and they still struggle with the negative impacts of absenteeism, but technologies like Google classroom have helped some students stay connected, where they might otherwise lose touch completely.

Sought after trade-programs linked to attendance: Below, we describe Little Metro's innovative trade programs, which combine opportunities to earn capstones with skill development in a specific trade. These programs also provide a stipend, making it possible for students to support their families and/or save money as they attend school. Because the trade programs are popular, the school has made a conscious decision to link participation to attendance. Before students can begin a trade program and during the program itself, they must demonstrate an ability to attend class regularly. As one might predict, attendance improves dramatically for students in these programs. The leader of the Youth Build program explains:

Steve: We have the best attendance, because the kids really enjoy the hands-on, physical work. The stipend is also a major incentive. They get \$10 an hour. We tie their stipends

to attendance. If you're late to the site or late to class, there's a \$5 tardy fee. If you skip a class, then you lose your stipend for the day... They learn pretty quickly to have good attendance. And even when they do skip a class, they still want to be here at the site to work. (White male Youth Build leader)

Little Metro is looking continually for ways to motivate students to improve attendance and move toward graduation. While such creative approaches help, absenteeism continues to be a challenge. Dealing with it requires not only creative responses, but extreme patience and flexibility on the part of teachers.

Quality #4: Extreme patience and flexibility in the classroom: Teachers at Little Metro are highly committed to building relationships with their students as an essential first step in guiding them toward success. Every teacher we spoke to talked about the importance of those relationships. We were impressed with their dedication to this goal and noted that a great deal of patience was required for it to work. During one interview a teacher told us:

Maya: I have a student right now who I haven't seen for a while and I'm not sure what's going on with him. I've been emailing and calling: 'Come in, come in. We miss you. How can we get you plugged back in?' If I see that student now, I'm going to have to bolt just to get some face time with him. It can be really hard when you feel personally invested in a student's success and you just don't know what's going on. (White female social studies teacher)

That personal investment in each student, and the uncertainty that can go with it, is a central part of the job at Little Metro, requiring emotional endurance and a willingness to accept unknowns. But over time, such patience and persistence can pay off, as one teacher explains:

Anna: Sometimes you think it's not working, that nothing's happening. You want to give up, because it feels like they have. But if you just stick with them and sort of wait them out, a light turns on and they get to work. Most of them want to graduate, they want to accomplish something. That diploma gives them a sense of accomplishment and they know it's a stepping stone to something better. (White female art teacher)

Whether they have been formally trained in trauma informed practices or not, teachers at Little Metro understand that a respectful and caring teacher-student relationship forms the basis for student's re-engaging with school and making progress (Morgan et al., 2015). For some students, developing that sense of belonging must take precedence over academic progress, as another teacher explains:

Cheryl: Today we were eating lunch with a student who's gone through many different schools and had a lot of challenging experiences. He has finally landed here and it feels better for him. He wants to participate. He feels included and engaged. For him right now, that's more important than being academically successful. We'll eventually get to the academics. Right now, he just needs to belong. (Asian-American female social studies teacher)

Building on those individual relationships with students, teachers at Little Metro also seek to individualize their teaching, practicing an extreme form of pedagogical flexibility. This can be difficult for teachers accustomed to more traditional settings. “You have to be willing to set aside scope and sequence and prioritize other things,” explains a curriculum specialist. “You might be working with 6 kids in the same class at very different places in their skill level and prior knowledge. You’ll also have kids coming in every day that have missed previous material.” Teaching at Little Metro requires at least two forms of flexibility: differentiation of curriculum and pedagogy based on student ability and interest; and responding to fluctuating groups of students, due to inconsistent attendance. “You really can’t do a traditional lesson plan,” explains another teacher. “I tend to plan my sessions as a ‘to do’ list. When students come in, I’m trying to move each one forward on their list.” And while every teacher we spoke to emphasized the importance of flexibility and creativity, they each had different methods of putting it into action, depending on their area of teaching and personal preferences. Below, teachers describe some of the approaches they use in different academic areas.

Leah: I always use a pre and a post [math] assessment for my classes, to get a sense of progress. But the curriculum itself tends to be student-by-student, since they’re all at different levels. It’s not like Algebra 2 and they all have to meet the same standards. It’s much more individualized – this person is working on this skill and the next student is doing something different. I use themes to tie it together. For example, I teach a class called Math Games, where we do a lot of probability and statistics. The theme is how to use mathematical strategy effectively, so that’s infused throughout the course. Within the theme, I’m able to differentiate based on student ability, and nudge each of them forward in their understanding of math. (White female math teacher)

Maya: I want them doing [social studies] work that they find engaging and important. I use a lot of individual projects. For a genocide unit, we did a week or so of group stuff, but then I had each of them choose one thing to focus on for an individual project. This ends up being the best way to work with students where they’re at, especially with such a range of academic levels. (White female social studies teacher)

Many courses at City Academy are co-taught, making it possible for students to think across disciplines and work on more than one capstone in the same course. One example is a course called “A Closer Look,” which combines science and art. Drawing is used as a strategy to help students observe nature closely and make inferences about what they are observing. Frequent field trips are possible because of the small class size and access to a school van, so they can easily go to the zoo or a city park or forest. Another co-taught class is “Freakonomics,” which uses the work of Levitt and Dubner (2005) to examine statistics that challenge conventional wisdom on a host of social topics. This course is co-taught by a social studies and math teacher, so it addresses capstones in both areas. Co-teaching not only allows for curricular creativity, it also encourages teachers to process how students are doing with each other and cooperate in their approaches to student support.

Discussing the importance of curricular flexibility, teachers simultaneously praise the freedom they have and admit to the challenge of the work:

Cheryl: It's very empowering as a teacher to have the autonomy to design and teach classes that really speak to my students. We do have a curriculum committee, but if I can show them that my idea will be engaging, that it's going to connect with students, then the committee trusts me. We trust each other. (Asian-American female, social studies teacher)

Mary: Teachers here get very small class sizes, but they also have to get good at developing their own curriculum for each class and each student. You have to think of each student as a work of art. It's highly individualized instruction, but in a group setting, so students get that social interaction piece. Doing it well is difficult. (White female school director, founder, and teacher)

In addition to small class sizes and individualized instruction, students at Little Metro are also drawn to the hands-on, career-focused trade programs.

Quality #5: Innovative, trade-focused programs: We first met Steve, the Youth Build leader, on a sunny spring day at the work site, a residential city lot about three blocks from Little Metro. The site project will be a single-family home managed by a community housing organization that supports low income families. When we arrived, a crew of seven young men and women were getting tools and other materials ready for the morning's work. The crew worked diligently as we talked with Steve. "I'm really focused on team building out here," he explained. He continued:

Steve: Teams gel when people are working together and mentoring each other. That's what it feels like here. These kids are seeing success and they're feeling good about what we're doing. This is a serious work site. There's no swearing out here. There's no horse play. We have to be safe. And these kids police each other, because we're succeeding together and accomplishing things as a team. (White male Youth Build leader)

He talks further about helping his team develop their soft skills for the trade industries, like being on time, speaking professionally to the crew manager, working hard, and knowing how to manage time. He points out that there are good jobs available in the trades (many contractors cannot fill their crew rosters). His crew works the Youth Build site for a \$10 an hour stipend, as they build their skills and earn a diploma. If they finish that diploma with a good recommendation from Steve, they have the potential to double or triple that salary after a year of apprenticeship and success on the job. Steve makes a strong argument for a return to trades education in general, pointing out that you don't need a four-year degree to make a good living and that not everyone is cut out for classroom learning. "It doesn't mean that you're dumb or lazy," he tells his crews. "It means that you learn best by doing." Steve is a grassroots advocate for experiential, hands-on learning that keeps students actively engaged and leads to deeper understanding of the material. And this approach appears to be successful. Youth Build students have the best attendance records and highest rates of graduation at Little Metro. Students appear to enjoy the work, and they are highly incentivized to succeed, both financially and in terms of future job prospects. Meanwhile, they are also expected to complete their academic capstones, so participation in the program does not preclude education in more traditional areas.

Youth Build is the crown jewel of Little Metro's trade programs, but there are other opportunities and a willingness on the part of school leadership to try new programs, depending on student interest and need. A relatively new teacher is building a program in horticulture and

landscaping, which includes training in beekeeping (the school has a hive on the roof). She and her crew provide landscaping for the homes that the Youth Build crews have built. Ultimately, she'd like to build a full-blown urban agriculture program, with opportunities to learn about city gardening, animal husbandry, and environmental care in an urban context. Healthcare is another area of interest for many students. All students get trained in first aid and CPR, as a requirement for graduation. This has led some students to seek certification in phlebotomy or to take beginning courses in EMT training or nursing. Little Metro has also offered courses in forklift certification and beginning welding. Each year, the school makes an effort to survey students and respond to areas of interest as best they can. The overarching goal of the trade programs is to help students explore possible careers and build skills, while also moving in practical ways toward a post-secondary plan. For many students, the trade programs have provided a helpful bridge to success after graduation from Little Metro.

Pushback: Ongoing Challenges and Potential Pitfalls at Little Metro

Above, we have focused on the qualities that we believe allow Little Metro to succeed with students. As at any school, challenges arise. In this next section, we highlight some of those challenges.

Extreme Flexibility: Some who visit Little Metro might ask: Is there too much flexibility, and does this sometimes enable problematic habits that undermine student success? Is academic rigor possible in a setting where absenteeism and apathy about school are common? Both staff and students expressed some concern about this issue. One teacher described his hesitancy in this way:

James: Sometimes I feel like the way we help our kids is both good and bad. I hope I'm not babying them too much because not every teacher or boss in their future will be like that. (Asian-American male math teacher)

Other staff members wondered if there may be a need for "tough love" from time to time, particularly when students are failing to meet basic expectations for attendance and progress.

It is important to point out that rigor *does* exist at Little Metro. There are opportunities for students to earn college credit. Students participate in robotics competitions and solar-powered boat contests. During our visits, we witnessed moments of higher level learning in various subjects and we saw evidence of project-based work that required genuine effort and deep understanding. At the same time, we also met many students who just did not appear to think of themselves as academically oriented. This meant that they needed teachers who were patient with them and good at helping them build confidence and self-esteem. In other words, they *needed* teachers who were flexible.

Rather than framing extreme flexibility as a weakness, we would describe it as a conscious choice with both negative and positive consequences. Extreme flexibility at Little Metro makes rigor more sporadic and may at times reinforce negative habits, such as poor attendance and a hesitancy to tackle academic challenges. Meanwhile, such flexibility makes it possible for Little Metro to reach the students it seeks to serve, students who have not succeeded in more structured environments. It is precisely because the school privileges relationships and community ahead of academic achievement that many of its students find pathways to success. The ongoing difficulty for teachers is striking the right balance between providing that individualized support, while also pushing students to challenge themselves and do their best.

Staying Small vs Scaling Up: As noted, the current leadership is committed to staying small, because they see the school’s size as central to its mission and success. Meanwhile, that very success has led to increasing pressures to grow. Currently, Little Metro does not advertise or market its program beyond a simple webpage and word of mouth, but they always have a wait list. While leadership hates the idea of turning away students in need, they also see staying small as a necessary part of their success. The director has also been encouraged at various times to “scale up” by recreating similar programs elsewhere (as many successful charters attempt to do). “We would love to see our successes reproduced in other settings,” she admits, “and there are some charters and contract schools out there with similar approaches. But our focus needs to be on our kids here and that means staying small.” While it is true that some alternative schools in the area use similar approaches, there are still *many* students in the large, traditional schools who are at risk of dropping out or falling through the cracks. One purpose of this study is to share what is working at Little Metro, in the hopes that more alternative programs may take root. We also hope the traditional system might consider adopting some alternative approaches for struggling students.

Representation: The dynamic of race is complex at most U.S. schools, and Little Metro is no exception. Though it has a higher percentage of teachers of color (approximately 15%) than statewide averages (4-5%), white teachers still make up the majority of staff in a school made up mostly of students of color. This can put additional pressures on staff of color. Race may also affect the ability of white teachers to connect with students and build those relationships of trust. In a city, state, and country where race relations are strained, racial representation of teaching staff is critical. Based on our conversations, we believe that Little Metro is aware of these challenges and making efforts to address them. Recent hires have been Asian-American teachers, which aligns with student demographics. And the majority of teachers at the school (white and of color) appear committed to anti-racist frameworks as a central part of their pedagogy.

Continuity of Leadership: Highly effective leadership makes a qualitative difference at any school and replacing that leadership during times of transition is difficult. Though the director, Mary, shows no signs of slowing down, everyone at Little Metro knows that the school is highly dependent on her leadership – her commitment to the mission, her institutional knowledge and connections in the community, and her seemingly boundless energy for students. Replacing her (which may be necessary within five years) will be a challenge. One teacher admits, “This school is really Mary’s baby. I’m not sure what we’re going to do when she leaves. No one is ever going to replace her, but maybe there’s some sort of shared leadership that can happen.” Based on the quality of the teaching staff and their commitment to the mission, we believe that the school will find a way to weather this challenge, but there is no question that Mary’s retirement will require the school to adapt and evolve.

Conclusion: An Overarching Framework of Pedagogical and Institutional Plasticity

In this final section, we propose and define our own framework of **pedagogical and institutional plasticity**, as an approach to schooling which we see as crucial to success when working with adolescents who have faced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and are at risk of dropping out or experiencing the school-to-prison pipeline. Our research at a series of successful alternative programs like Little Metro has led to the development of this framework (Basford, Lewis, & Trout, 2020).

Schools which practice pedagogical and institutional plasticity are willing and able to adapt and change in response to student need. Classrooms are student-centered spaces, with flexible curricula, project-based learning, and differentiated instructional approaches. Culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogies promote critical awareness and link learning to real world problems (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gonzalez & Amanti, 2005; Paris & Alim, 2017). Student-centeredness also extends to advising and guidance, where students receive the individual attention they need, first to establish trust and build a relationship, then to ensure that students have the resources they need to meet their needs and develop a personal education plan that initiates a trajectory of success.

At the institutional level, a philosophy of plasticity eschews rigid discipline policies (such as zero tolerance) and leans heavily toward restorative justice practices, where student voice is valued and consequences focus on repairing injustice, re-establishing healthy relationships, and building a strong community (Davis, 2013; Smith 2015). Through peer-mediation or adult-supervised conversations, students participate in seeking to understand what went wrong and how it can be repaired; consequences are individualized and context-specific (Dalporto, 2013; Smith, 2015). Institutional plasticity also refers to school-wide programming, which ideally provides motivational hooks that garner student interest and encourage re-engagement with school. School leaders plan explicitly for multiple points of entry throughout the year and have creative responses to chronic absenteeism. As with classroom instruction, programming is malleable and highly responsive to student needs and interests. School leaders are open to trying new programmatic ideas as they arise.

The purpose of this paper, as well as others in the series, has been to highlight one alternative program that is successfully practicing pedagogical and institutional plasticity. We hope that it can serve as a model for those seeking to educate students who have not succeeded in the traditional system. It is imperative that we not give up on the students at the heart of this study. Little Metro fulfills this vital mission through highly personalized and relational teaching, one student at a time.

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