

UP Academy Charter School of Boston

Questions as derived from Panel Review

Mission and Vision

1. What do you mean by “achieve their full potential”? How is that operationalized throughout the application?

- We believe kids need certain things to be equipped for college: strength of character, core academic skills, preparedness, a strong knowledge base, and habits of mind. Not only will we provide kids with the right amount of time dedicated to academic subjects, but also we will provide arts and athletics to round out the experience.

2. You mention in your vision that “within weeks”, student will have “mastered some of the core reading and math skills that they have struggled to grasp in years past and will be reflecting on character traits such as perseverance and integrity.” How will they achieve this rapid core skill development? And, how will they internalize perseverance and integrity?

- Initially, the kids will participate in a summer orientation where we will conduct intense assessment. Using the data, we will know which kids will need additional support. With a sense of urgency, we will max out on intensive support to focus on areas of weakness and strength.
- The school will set up a strong culture of achievement from day one. If you can establish that culture up front, you can create an environment where every minute can be spent on core learning. Between 8 and 4 p.m., you can have students master a lot of objectives, reinforced by homework. Add all that time up over two weeks, and the kids will have a very different set of experience and expectations from what they have now.

a. You highlight two key philosophies: “urgency” and “no excuses.” How does this philosophy work to serve the diverse needs of individual students? Subgroups?

- “Urgency” and “no excuses” go hand in hand. We have developed a system of supports that enable you to live up to “urgency” and “no excuses.” With these values in place, we are saying we expect you to rise to a high bar. We’re expecting you to get there, and we’re going to build systems around this expectation, so that you have no choice but to get there.

Description of the Community (ies) to be Served

1. How did you determine parent, teacher and staff support for your proposed school?

- The critical challenge is to re-enroll as many of the kids enrolled there right now as possible. Our team has been dogged about getting all the kids to come back.

- Trying to re-enroll the 7th and 8th grade. 76% of the existing student population or 240 applications have been received, in addition to 60 applications from non-Gavin students.
- The 7th and 8th grade transferring process in Boston Public Schools (BPS) has not started yet until February.
- We have 162 open spots for 6th grade with 550 enrollment applications for these slots. For 6th grade seats, there are 3 kids on the waiting list for every 1 kid. There's a huge difference in how parents think the school will be.
- Boston Public Schools (BPS) has been very impressed with the outreach UP Academy has been doing to serve all students in the current school. They have been proactive in working with the BPS enrollment system. Although the law requires UP to have a separate enrollment lottery, BPS has been working collaboratively with UP so that the process is seamless from the family perspective.
- Each family at the Gavin in 6th and 7th grade will get a home visit if we haven't received their application yet.

Educational Philosophy, Curriculum and Instruction

1. How is the “path to college” a comprehensive thread throughout the educational program?

- One key issue is to get kids from middle school to develop the foundational skills to do high school work. At UP, kids will be high school and college ready. We believe that college is essential for kids today. In order for kids to be competitive in the global market, they have to go to college. If we give them the foundational knowledge and skills to be college ready, then we're contributing to that mission. This is the fiber of the school.
- One of my questions for current students is where they want to be in 10 years. One Gavin student told me she didn't want to be a maid. From naming homeroom after college, to talking about what you can do in high school to prepare for college, to doing college visits, we will prepare the students' mind for this path.
- Will have graduate support services to keep kids on track.

2. You report that you intend to gather material from Boston's high performing schools and provide teachers will scope and sequences, unit plans, and a suggested pacing guide. Where are you in that process?

- This work is done by two full time academic managers. They dedicate their time to go to excelling schools to gather curriculum materials and ask questions about how to use these materials. In August, teachers will have clear curriculum maps, performance standards, access to interim assessments, and they will be provided with robust professional development around instructional methods and effective practices. Teachers can expect to have a clear outline of what their course should look like. Will be provided with resources to examine efficacy and how to implement the curriculum.

3. How will you ensure that teachers are proficient in delivering the chosen instructional methods? How do teacher evaluations work? How is professional development determined?

- August is a full month of professional development for teachers. Prior to that month, staff will meet to plan out that month. There will be intensive sessions on curriculum development and implementation, instructional strategies, and operating systems. We will talk about building a culture of high expectations and no excuses on a foundation of enthusiasm and joy.
- Each teacher will receive an observation at least once a month with the principal or the Director of Curriculum and Instruction (DCI).

a. Distinguish role of DCI as coach versus evaluator.

- The DCI is more than a coach, but they do coach teachers. They will do the vast majority of observations and draft the actual evaluations. The principal's role is to act as a mentor to the DCI and point out what to look for in the classroom.

Assessment, Promotion, and Graduation Standards

1. Please describe graduation standards.

- The vision is that during the 8th grade year, the students will be supported as they explore and craft an essay about college and the college process. The purpose of the essay is to ensure that students are thinking critically about what they learn at UP and to help them develop concrete plans for what the next four years of high school will be like.
- The PREP system is an important tool for us. It measures how prepared, engaged, and respectful students are. We think it's a good system to demonstrate the student's proficiency. If a student is getting a 70 on the PREP rubric, that says he/she is doing well. A score of 70 in 6th grade will be different than that in 7th grade; in 6th grade, there's more support for students, but as they move up, we want them to be independent and make their own judgment.

2. Clarify the communication system of student performance to families and students.

- The weekly PREP reports will comprise the benchmarks on the annual report. Scott developed this system, and it was a critical component of turning Excel around. The PREP report contains, at a very detailed level, which homework you completed or not, along with information about demerits, grade, and attendance. This report acts as a point of reference for parents, teachers, and kids to talk. Administratively, it also allows the school to collect data.

School Characteristics

1. Please describe your methods to support students with a wide range of needs?

a. After school, Homework club, Tutoring, Saturday tutoring?

- Extended day is a huge opportunity for us to make more progress with kids. This buys us a lot more time to make more progress with kids, which is huge. Kids are

at school until 4 p.m.; after that they have homework club and detention. This is driven by real-time data. Nothing worse than falling behind with your homework. If you have behavioral infractions – it's detention.

- From 4 to 5 p.m. is a focused period that will be a combination of study hall, homework groups, and enrichment. This is critical time for teachers to work with individual students on skills and concepts.
- Students will be in the homeroom with a teacher supervising. We will use interim assessments to group students in groups of 10 and work with them. If you're not pulled for tutoring, you're still working on your homework.
- Saturday tutoring is a program borrowed from Excel Academy. For students struggling in math, this presents an exciting opportunity to bring in volunteers from community to work one on one or one on two with students on very focused math skills. We will have a 15 minutes training session for any new adult coming in. We expect 40 or so volunteers every Saturday. Depending on what the students' needs are, they may be required to go. We draw recruits from the community, corporations, our alumni clubs etc.
- The Saturday programming, homework club, etc. is required and parents and students know that when they apply.

2. As a school turnaround, you are intending a dramatic shift in school organization and culture. How will this transformation in the school culture occur? Please describe the orientation at the beginning of the year. How will the school culture be promoted and maintained during the rest of the school year?

- Primarily, it's about the relationships. Kids work harder if there's an adult there who believes in them. We plan to break the school down into smaller units, with 3 teachers per unit. In this way, you can develop more familiarity with the kids and can keep up with them to ensure support.
- In the first few weeks, you're pumped and you get the first bump of confidence. It's what happens after that that matters. Keeping a focus on celebrating and having joyful atmosphere is critical. You have to build in a culture of joy and community.
- Want to bring families along. If we get their support, we're better off. Will involve them through PREP reports and home visits. Parents will have to sign off on homework assignments. There's an expectation for teachers to communicate with families on a regular basis. There's a group of families who are very disengaged from school system right now, and we have to work to rebuild that trust.
- We will have uniforms and enforce some softer touches like having a homework station. Have to set a tone that promotes high standards.

3. Why do you intend to gauge parental satisfaction only in eighth grade: Why not at every grade level?

- We would collect data in 8th grade to understand the culmination of their middle school experience and the sense of preparedness for high school.

- We're going to survey parents at the end of every school year and review that data closely. It may be a technical issue of what we're going to hold ourselves accountable to (8th grade), but operationally, we would collect data every year.

Special Student Populations and Services

1. How will all content teachers and staff complete SEI Categories training in August 2011 and complete curriculum development?

- BPS has been investing heavily in getting its teachers category trained. This is a clear expectation for UP Academy teachers to be category trained also. Teachers interested in UP will probably be taking these trainings before hand.
- There's an acute awareness by BPS teachers that they need to be category trained. This will be more of an issue for us for teachers coming from outside the district.
- We recognize that it takes 40 hours to category train. That's why we have 4 weeks of training.
- We're going to work really hard to get as many teachers up to speed as possible. This is a priority for BPS too. We'll try to get teachers to do these trainings between now and August.

2. In the future, where will the district place the students who were assigned to Gavin for specialized services?

- BPS is working with UP Academy to make sure enrollment is distributed evenly. We'll make it clear to families that all students will be accepted regardless of needs. This school will support all students toward success.
- The district will not be reserving spots at the Gavin for Vietnamese shelter immersion students anymore. We create these policies so that all students can be served.
- The Gavin has a significant portion of students with disabilities. The district is creating a satellite location in the Gavin building to serve multiple handicap students. It will be a separate program. UP Academy will step up to work with those students after school is over.
- The issue is about where to place multiple handicap students from the district. Current multiple handicap students at the Gavin will have a choice to enroll either in UP Academy or in the district-run program located in the Gavin building.

Capacity

1. What have you learned from the experience at Excel? What worked and what didn't? What, specifically are you replicating and/or modifying?

- You can do so much if you find truly great people to work in the school. We have to find about 60 great people to work in school. They will come from Boston and from around the country. Already, we have received 1,600 high quality applications.
- It's also about putting systems in place and learning from other schools. At Excel, we had to communicate the vision in a consistent way and set out

expectations for parents and students. We did that well at Excel and will replicate that at UP.

- It's not the parents and the kids that need to be changed, but the culture. 95% of Excel families come back. Kids who were getting into behavioral issues were no longer troublesome when we shaped up the school. We need to have consistent messaging.

a. What will you implement at UP to make this happen?

- Documentation is critical. At Excel, we built playbooks for every process needed in the school day. We spent 2 or 3 weeks in orientation reviewing the playbooks and practicing scenarios that might occur.
- We've spent almost a year planning for UP Academy. Unlocking Potential has spent upwards of a million dollar to plan out the implementation of this school turnaround.
- At Excel, people came because we were so explicit about being systems driven. It's imperative that we come in to UP with established operating systems and inculcate teachers into these specific systems to ensure centralization and integrity.
- At the Gavin, typically 65% of families come back. Already 75% are coming back this year. Our goal is to raise that percentage even higher. Renovations will be put into the building. Families are primed that this will be a different school.

2. What qualifications did you look for in a principal? What process did you use to decide on Amanda Gardner?

- Unlocking Potential did a massive search.
- Wanted someone who can do school turnaround with a strong focus on instructional leadership. Wanted someone who understands the model and have the appetite, bandwidth, and leadership skills to implement it.
- The board reviewed her resume, talked to Unlocking Potential about her, and had individual discussions with each board member to see whether she was a good fit. After the board approved, Amanda then spoke with BPS and the superintendent.

3. When do you intend to hire the principal?

- We hope to hire her as part of ramp up. Want to ensure that Amanda has a role in hiring the 60 teachers in the upcoming months. She will transition to full time in late spring.

4. In the national search for teachers, how will you deal with the issue of certification?

- We realize this is different from the commonwealth charter process. Our director of talent is working with human resources at BPS to understand what qualifications are needed for teachers. BPS will ultimately hire them, not us. It is the responsibility of the candidates to get themselves ready for hire by BPS. This means that sometimes between now and September, some teachers will have to pass the MTEL.

- BPS human resources team is working closely with UP Academy to make sure they are aware of licensing requirements. BPS has a team to support this large hiring.

5. What is the connection between Boston Teacher Residency and UP?

- From the BTR perspective, we care about placing our cohort of teachers where the neediest students are.
- From the UP perspective, we want to hire with some flexibility to choose for the best candidates.

Governance and Management

1. What specific management functions will Unlocking Potential provide the UP Academy?

- Unlocking Potential is the management organization we want to partner with. The board is not relinquishing any management responsibility. Unlocking Potential is doing all the up-front preparation work. This is the first time a Horace Mann charter is taking over the whole school.
- This will be first time trial for Unlocking Potential as well to do school turnaround.
- Unlocking Potential will:
 - Get the school ready to open
 - Develop curriculum and training for teachers and school leadership
 - Develop the tools for evaluation
 - Provide support around finances and budgeting
 - Provide support with procurement and with the IT system
- Once the school opens, Unlocking Potential will:
 - Continue curriculum development
 - Provide ongoing training and monitoring
 - Recruit additional people
 - Provide ongoing professional development
 - Help with capital improvements and fundraising
 - Provide quality management and assurance of the school

a. What is their fundraising capacity for Boston?

- Fundraising potential is big and will not be a major issue.

2. Please describe the services that the district will provide to the school.

- Staff of the school is all officially employees of BPS and their employment will be handled through BPS. From a financial perspective, BPS is the funder of the school.
- The school has the option to choose which services they want to purchase from the district. They have chosen to buy access and the resources of special education and English Language Learner services.
- BPS is working collaboratively with UP through the enrollment process; BPS is providing communication to families to make sure messaging is aligned.

- UP will be given a school building and also transportation and food services.

3. How will the board hold Unlocking Potential accountable for student performance?

- We've set out some clear student performance benchmarks. Will have annual performance review of Unlocking Potential and annual renewal of contract. In June, when the MCAS results come back, we will reevaluate. In first year, the timing won't work out, so we will look at culture and climate, the surveys, evaluations of teachers and principals, internal academic assessments, student attrition and attendance.
- It's important to have headline numbers, but we won't be waiting until the end of the year to review data. Data and transparency of oversight are what attracted me to this effort. I would emphasize that there will be specific measures on how we will evaluate ourselves.

4. Please explain the following staffing issues:

a. Why do you anticipate the dramatic reduction of staffing for special needs students?

- We don't anticipate that anymore. It's about matching the multiple handicap students with services.
- The Gavin has had a high percentage of students with disabilities. BPS doesn't expect that UP will have such a high sampling of students with disabilities over time due to the effects of the lottery system. This does not suggest that UP lacks interest or commitment to serving those students.

b. What is the difference between HS placement manager and graduate services staff?

- HS placement manager makes sure that the kids end up in the best high school for them. Once kids are in intensive college prep high schools, we will have people tracking and supporting them on their way to college.

c. How do you propose to find a dually certified science and social studies teacher? What is your contingency plan?

- We're hoping to hire a half-time science teacher. Now this frees us up to hire a half-time social sciences teacher. The reason for this hiring is the number of classes being taught and having students take the same amount of time for science and social studies.

d. What do the two office managers do?

- The officer manager at Excel, serving a couple hundred students, is busy with answering the phone and the door, greeting students, entering data, and preparing the absence folders. Going from that number of students to 500 students, we anticipate a gap of service in reaching all students.

Facilities

1. What kind of renovations are you thinking of?

- We want to make the impression that you're coming into a new and excellent school. Want to make the teachers feel valued.
- Broken window theory: there are cosmetic things that can have tremendous impact when students walk into the school building. The look can have huge impact on kids and families when they first walk into the building. There will be signage. It will be impactful on the culture.

Budget

1. Please explain your thinking about the school management organization intending to make a grant of \$250,000 to the school?

- Unlocking Potential is a nonprofit and wants to make a donation to the school.
- It would be cleaner for the school to have a procurement process to renovate the school. We are also making the necessary relationships with BPS facilities.

2. If you don't receive sufficient funding (\$500,000 turn-around grant, etc.) do you have contingency plans?

- Scott has been incredibly successful to date fundraising for a school that has not been chartered yet.
- Revenues assumed here are for a slightly smaller student population. We have a 5% cushion for the school. We also have conservative estimates to provide a buffer. Given some of that cushion, even if it's less than \$500,000, with capacity around fundraising, we can meet the difference.
- Unlocking Potential is in a sweet spot right now in the national picture with support from the president to the governor of the state. That political will has led to lots of philanthropic dollars to support turnaround. We have raised over \$1.5 million. We have talked to foundations, and feel confident that if we need more resources, we can approach new and existing funders to increase the commitments.

3. Which line item expenditures reflect in-kind covered services?

- The way we constructed the budget has to do with the way the district does budgeting.
- The largest expenses are transportation, facilities, benefits, and central office administration costs.

4. How did you determine 8% service fee for Unlocking Potential?

- We determined the 8% by figuring out what it costs for Unlocking Potential to serve UP Academy. We also looked at some benchmarks nationally, and the range is 6 to 16%.

- a. DCIs: Employees of Up will transfer to employees at school: What does the school receive for the \$65,000 in instructional services fees?**
- This is the in-kind services from BPS. UP Academy is not buying special education and English Language Learner teachers, just the access to those resources and consulting services.