LESSONS from the
GO College Program

College Access Programs
at Low-Performing
Priority High Schools:
A Principal’s Perspective

Council for Opportunity in Education
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In July 2014, Keith left his position at the Council for Opportunity in Education to begin his tenure as superintendent of the Danville Independent School District in Danville, Ky.

Keith began his career in middle school social studies in west Baltimore with Teach for America. Keith left with more questions than answers related to the needs of children and families in struggling urban schools that serve impoverished communities.

He enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania’s Education Policy and Practice doctoral program and received his doctorate. He also worked with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, the Coalition of Essential Schools, and the Philadelphia Education Fund and served as the acting principal of West Philadelphia High School.

In Louisville, KY, Keith spent a decade as principal for high performing, Meyzeek Middle School and low performing, Academy @Shawnee. Both schools experienced marked gains - particularly among the most vulnerable students and earned a visit from US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan.

Keith credits the growth of students, staff, and schools to a healing approach to the process of change, best represented in the African proverb, “we lift as we climb.”
College Access Programs at Low-Performing Priority High Schools: A Principal’s Perspective

One in a series of reflections on college access partnerships

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My Career in education began in **West Baltimore** at one of the lowest performing middle schools in Maryland

I worked in a number of struggling urban schools in the Mid-Atlantic and Mid-West regions of the United States where schools were stigmatized with labels such as "school in crisis" and "persistently most dangerous." My roles ranged from teacher, to researcher to College Access Program provider.

But most often I was the school principal. At every site, College Access Programs sought to improve opportunities for students and conditions for learning. Consistently the level of impact and program sustainability correlated most highly with the quality of the individual or individuals providing direct services to students. No matter a program's purpose, prestige, resource-base, or advantage, the quality of relationships between the staff and school determines a College Access Program's longevity, scalability, and reciprocal support from the school.

In many instances, college access staff must pass the school’s gauntlet to earn the right to take time away from student instruction. The gauntlet takes the form of giving the college access staff the most challenging students, the custodial-closet-turned-office, fees for use of the school copier, or assigned supervisory duties in the cafeteria. The implied question and response is, “Are you skilled enough to keep up with the rest of us? If not, you’re only in the way and slowing us down.” While such a challenge may be unfair, a school already supports and develops its own staff and rarely

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has time to provide nurturance to those who ultimately answer to someone else. College Access Program staff members who fail the probationary period often undermine future success for the program they represent. Sometimes those who pass earn an overstated importance because they made it through the gauntlet without the care and supports provided to teachers. These are not caricatures of the work; this is my experience.

The critical importance of College Access Programs in low-performing schools seems obvious. Such schools need all the help they can get to establish sustainable, positive trajectories for students. These schools must utilize an “all hands on deck” approach to surround students with academic, emotional, and social supports necessary to level the playing field. But if the turnaround of low-performing schools was this formulaic, it would already have been done.

“It is gut-wrenching how many low-performing schools identified then, remain low-performing today.”

Formulas identifying and labeling low-performing schools came into existence more than 30 years ago with the 1983 federal report, A Nation at Risk, and the introduction of high stakes accountability testing. It is gut-wrenching how many low-performing schools identified then, remain low-performing today. Low-performing schools and their reformers established programs, created partnerships, and opened doors to outside providers, coaches, resources, and committed citizens looking to create a cultural and performance change. Yet these schools’ respective positions in the ranking order largely remain unchanged.

Are College Access Programs, therefore, ineffective in low-performing schools? No. Many successful adults credit such programs for providing key services, resources, and relationships unavailable at their schools. The challenge for College Access Programs – in their relationship with low performing schools – is to demonstrate effectiveness and credibility in order to earn a support position that is regarded by school leadership as integral to the school’s reformation process.
Since 2009, The US Department of Education has awarded $4.5 billion in School Improvement Grants to “priority” schools.

$3 billion alone for Cohort 1 schools in 2009-10

Cohort 1 is comprised of 826 schools:

- Of 826 schools, 58% (479) are urban schools
- Of 826 schools, 45% (372) are high schools

33% of students in identified schools are Hispanic

44% of students in identified schools are African American

78% of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch

Cohort 2 (school year 2010-11), 504 more schools were identified.

Cohort 3 (school year 2011-12), 154 more schools were identified.

(www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sigoverviewppt.pdf)
The US Department Of Education Defines These Schools:

For designation within this practice brief, “low performing schools” refers to those receiving federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds and thus labeled “priority” or “persistently low achieving” schools by the US Department of Education. In this brief, the term “priority” will be used. The US Department of Education (2012) defines these schools as:

1. Any Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that:
   
   A. Is among the lowest-achieving five percent of Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring or the lowest-achieving five Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring in the State, whichever number of schools is greater; or

   B. Is a high school that has had a graduation rate as defined in 34 C.F.R. § 200.19(b) that is less than 60 percent over a number of years;

2. Any secondary school that is eligible for, but does not receive, Title I funds that:

   A. Is among the lowest-achieving five percent of secondary schools or the lowest-achieving five secondary schools in the State that are eligible for, but do not receive, Title I funds, whichever number of schools is greater; or

   B. Is a high school that has had a graduation rate as defined in 34 C.F.R. § 200.19(b) that is less than 60 percent over a number of years.

Schools that neither receive Title I funds nor are eligible for Title I funding (free and reduced lunch population less than 40%) are not identified by the US Department of Education regardless of their level of performance. So, technically, a school can be low-performing but have no federal label assigned.

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Harsh Realities face schools identified as “priority”

The US Department of Education allows only four options:

1. **SCHOOL CLOSURE**

2. **SCHOOL RE-STAFFING**
   at least 50% of instructional staff must be replaced

3. **SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION**
   intensive professional development provided and ties between student performance and teacher evaluation must be established

4. **EDUCATION MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION (EMO)**
   partnering groups take control of the school, be they universities, businesses, or charter school management organizations

In all instances, principals with more than three years in their school buildings must be removed. While recent reviews of SIG impact show mixed results and the US DOE approving waivers that grant limited flexibility to states, the high stakes pressure remains unchanged and the level of school-based accountability has reached new heights. There is no room for a staff learning curve or even incremental progress. In light of this reality, College Access Programs, despite answering to different bosses, funders, and metrics, must become an integral part of the priority school team in order to maintain and sustain access within the school. Otherwise, they are in the way, a distraction from what matters most to the school at this particular moment. No matter how short-sighted or narrow-minded this perspective may be, it is the reality for school leadership when self-preservation is in play.

The Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) does not shy away from supporting program services for students in priority schools.
The Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) does not shy away from supporting program services for students in priority schools. In fact, COE was awarded a federal Innovation in Instruction (I3) grant to create GO College - the next iteration of services for low income youth who will be the first in their families to graduate from college (abbreviated LIFG). It is no surprise that significant numbers of these students attend priority schools. GO College assembles business, university, school district, and school partners to support full-time college coaches in high schools with high concentrations of LIFG youth. Working in Louisville KY and Erie PA, GO College operates in six high schools, four of which receive School Improvement Grant funding based upon their federal categorization of low performance. The GO College experience reflects the experience faced by College Access Programs in these or similar schools.

A slow moving target, priority schools become an exaggerated example to the general public for all that is wrong

No matter how well-intentioned College Access Program staff may be, they must first realize that priority schools are, by nature, xenophobic. Often these schools are overtaken by central office staff and outside evaluators who blast the school for its shortcomings. A slow moving target, priority schools become an exaggerated example to the general public for all that is wrong in a local school district or even with public education in general. A district, crippled in its ability to defend the school or explain why more has not been done, may say nothing or choose to chime in with the criticism in order to portray the problem as isolated within that school and not indicative of larger, systemic district, community, or statewide issues.

This growing sense of isolation is exacerbated by the punishments for low performance. Tolls exacted are the heaviest on the school’s principal with little to no focus on central office. Principals get removed – not chief officers, assistant superintendents, superintendents, board members, or others who may have control over the priority schools. Schools receiving SIG funds may be closed, handed over to an Education Management Organization, re-staffed, or transformed with controversial value-added measures of teachers. Note again, there is no direct impact on any non-school-based personnel. A priority school principal is then caught between
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district and state directions that conflict. If the principal sides with the district, the principal remains in good political standing with his/her evaluator but risks being removed by state leadership. If the principal sides with the state, s/he risks being targeted by his/her district as uncooperative and therefore curtails future career options as well. Thus, priority status makes for delicate and often uncomfortable conditions where the public purposes of taking risks and focusing energy into the service of students are compromised.

Because of the potential dire consequences, outcomes to avoid punishment are clear. Standards and measures of performance are set so that difficult decisions facing the school can be data-driven. While this may seem “fair” on the surface, there is an ongoing and important debate discussing the extent to which standards and measures are equitable across schools, the district, and state.

It is within this context that College Access Programs must function. No matter the level of student participation, capacity for data collection, or investment by the College Access Program, the school will not invest authentically until it knows that the College Access Program has the school’s performance requirements as its top priority. No matter the demonstrable good a College Access Program may show, the school cannot substitute those results for what it must produce to satisfy district policy, state law, or federal mandate.

The answer is simple, but the solution is challenging.

The answer is simple, but the solution is challenging. Cohesion among priority schools and College Access Programs relies upon a unification of priorities. College Access Programs must be more than partners with schools in helping them meet their standards and measures; they must share in the challenge to achieve the schools’ mandated ends. If a school must show 47% of students on grade level in reading, the College Access Program must somehow fit that 47% benchmark into its own reporting and performance needs – even if the College Access Program does not have the mandate to raise reading levels.

To take the reading example further, consider that data, experience, and intuition show that effective readers appear in greater concentration in pools of successful students. The College Access Program must adjust its lens to prioritize and support reading development to the extent that it meets their needs and goals as well. College Access Programs can find similar intersections with other core disciplines, SAT/ACT exams, or measures of college and
career readiness. The aim is for students in a priority school to hear a unified message from sources within, around, and beyond school walls. The call to action is for learning and re-framing on the part of the College Access Program providers.

Cohesion among priority schools and college access programs relies upon a unification of priorities.

There is some truth to the oft-heard belief among College Access Programs that, “It’s the school’s job to teach; our job is to help students move successfully to and through transitions.” Whether or not the statement is accurate is a debate reserved for non-priority schools. The simple truth is that access to students, staff, and school-based resources hinges upon a College Access Program’s willingness and ability to help shoulder the load that burdens the school.

If the school teaches reading:

- What is the program doing to get students to class?
- How does it help the teacher decipher reading data?
- How does the College Access Program reinforce for families the importance of reading?
- Can the College Access Program provide in-class reading support?
- Can they offer extended day space and time for additional reading help?

When College Access Programs can meet their goals while adopting this perspective, they will impact priority schools in broad and significant ways.
Principles

The following principles may guide the staff of College Access Programs as they enter and sustain investment in priority schools:

Speak the school language to cohort and school staff.

If a school sets goals of college readiness as its target, then learn the college readiness language until you speak it like a native. Variation in ‘official’ definitions of “college ready” may vary at the federal, state, and College Access Program levels. Reinforce the goals in programming for the cohort and in interactions with school staff. Students then receive a unified message and the program earns reciprocal school endorsement.

Example: “College ready” as defined by a College Access Program may mean student performance that includes GPA over 2.5, a composite ACT of 18 or higher, and FAFSA completed. “College ready” as defined by the priority school in alignment with state accountability systems may mean meeting ACT-identified benchmarks in English, reading, and math only.

Know the data of the cohort better than those at the school

College Access Program staff must be fluent in the standards and measures of performance by which the school is judged. Then, they must know the status of each cohort member as it relates to the standards and measures.

Example: If a school must demonstrate a 91% daily attendance rate, what is the attendance rate of the College Access Program cohort? How does it compare? What factors are attributable to the cohort’s attendance? How can those factors inform whole-school attendance practices?
Find connections between program data and school performance.

Narrowing the degrees of separation between targets set for the school and the College Access Program creates new avenues of mutual support, advocacy and synergy.

**Example:** The school must show 37% of students testing college ready as determined by the SAT. While the cohort has no specific SAT performance obligations, the College Access Program gains favor by running SAT preparation courses for its cohort and others in the school. Test results that follow show the cohort can boast an SAT college ready rate of 42%, thereby contributing significantly to the school goal. Getting students into college just got easier for the College Access Program by their cohort raising its SAT achievement. In turn, the school helps subsidize future SAT preparation for all students, allowing the College Access Program to re-allocate its funds for other program-specific purposes.

Serve the school culture as it will in turn benefit the cohort.

Priority schools often teeter on cultural collapse. Media coverage and community reputation may compound school damage coming from the priority label. Staff and students internalize the stigma which manifests by some taking a “me against the world” approach while others just give up. The resulting dissension can undermine the potential to reach a greater good by risking change. Staff members of College Access Programs are uniquely positioned to be catalysts in this arena because they are not school staff and hold no evaluative power over the school. Hence, they are free thinkers, able to see opportunity and be creative in environments that protect themselves with the claim, “We’ve already tried that and it didn’t work.”

**Example:** Put coffee and doughnuts on a cart and deliver to teachers during the middle of 2nd period on Wednesdays. Deliver fresh flowers to the main office once a month. Paint or decorate the school’s entranceway vestibule. Take responsibility for coordinating the games at the pep rally. Show a movie and provide popcorn to students with perfect attendance during testing. These small steps and gestures make staff members who want to see the glass as half-full more open to the thoughts, ideas, and energies brought forth by the College Access Program.
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Earn status among both staff and students by helping the school meet its basic needs.

Before any real change can take hold, a school must provide a safe learning environment. Students in and around a school building are experts at discovering where adults are not present. Schools spend tremendous time and resources planning appropriate coverage. Be part of the team filling the gaps. Students will respond in-kind to the energy College Access Program staff members invest.

Example: Whether it is greeting students at the door in the morning or seeing them out, helping with hallway transitions during class changes, being a presence in the lunchroom, or covering a class because a substitute teacher is running late, these actions will garner the greatest return for program support, endorsement, and development by the school.

Educate the funder/sponsor of the College Access Program to increase impact.

Those who create and guide the funding of College Access Programs hold a view of education that may or may not match the dynamics of the priority school. Feedback from direct service staff will aid in the program’s evolution and influence policies and funding streams for future endeavors. This will maximize effectiveness and sustainability.

Example: Give journals out to students at random times and ask them to record their day. Do the same with staff. Take their musings and assemble a collection of “a Day in the Life.” Use this as foundational evidence to illuminate, explain, or address knowledge gaps on the part of the funder that can be linked to hindrances in the program’s ability to facilitate desired deliverables.

Develop a universal expertise: become a spreadsheet master.

Data analysis is the new standard by which trust and capacity is measured among student advocates. A school’s investment in a College Access Program can be accelerated exponentially if the staff can run numbers and illuminate the story sometimes buried in tables. Being deft in spreadsheet manipulation earns a level of immortality in schools and garners a powerful voice in the decision-making at the school.

Example: Microsoft Excel is the industry standard. Learn calculation formulas, conditional formatting, filters, sorting, and pivot tables to mine clear and critical data from complex datasets.
Spread the wealth.

If the bus for the college visit has four empty seats, offer them to another class, program, or activity. If a university is providing more tutors than needed, include students from other initiatives. Sharing in this manner establishes a safe space for programs to interact without trampling on sacred ground. It simultaneously creates lines of communication that can ensure it is not the same group of students getting the attention of all the programs. Protecting against duplication of services increases the number of students served and bolsters the quality of research by minimizing cohort cross-contamination.

Example: Organize a bi-weekly meeting of school staff whose responsibilities are similar, comparable, or impactful in relation to the College Access Program. The meeting should ask for all those involved to bring ideas, issues, and programming to the table. Then, as facilitator, stress maximizing everyone’s abilities and resources to impact the greatest number of students. Publish a master calendar and help each other out with respective events. The efforts will be reciprocated.

Communicate with families via school-based distributions.

Families care little who is providing a service to students as long as the service is reaching them. By communicating with school-based distributions, the College Access Program is seen as a core component of the school. Separate distributions may be discarded due to unfamiliarity with the name of the program, its letterhead, etc.

Example: When school report cards are mailed home, attach a flyer or newsletter highlighting the work of the College Access Program. Contribute to the school’s newsletters and newspapers. Be a regular presence on the school’s social media sites.

Follow through means everything.

Empty promises can damage relationships beyond repair. Establish credibility early and often by making attainable agreements with the school to accrue small wins. A pattern of wins can maintain relations when an emergency arises in which guarantees must be amended.

Example: The College Access Program writes articles for the school newsletter and appears weekly on the closed circuit school broadcast – always on time and with useful information. Then, the guest speaker arranged by the College Access Program for the class assembly cancels at the last minute. The school rallies (rather than canceling the assembly) and has one of its popular teachers fill in and deliver a relevant message to the class.
Navigating Interactions and Relationships in priority schools

Navigating interactions and relationships in priority schools is analogous to learning to square dance in a dark room with an auctioneer as the caller. Connections and rhythm can be fleeting and easily missed. Following the guidelines set forth increases the chances of high quality relationships between College Access Programs and priority schools.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THE RELATIONSHIP IS NOT WORKING? When staff of College Access Programs make statements about the schools with which they work like, “They don’t want us here,” “They do not put students first,” or “There is no learning going on,” it is possible that the remarks are accurate. It is more likely the case that the College Access Programs have not built the relationships with the school necessary to gain an insider’s view of the school’s functionality, the intensity of pressure from external forces, or history of school dynamics. Access to information must be earned in order for college access staff to be given the entire school playbook and not just a few torn pages.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THE RELATIONSHIP IS WORKING? The watershed event occurs when college access staff members are recruited by school leadership to become full-time employees of the school and district. It is a school’s complementary way of saying, “We value you, your work, and care for our students and school. You belong here.” Attempts at personnel theft by a school or district is high praise.

Priority schools did not get assigned the tragic label purely by their own doing – or undoing. Often a series of conditions promoted the manifestation of weaknesses and struggles, like a mudslide caused by a faulty foundation and heavy rain. The schools may face challenges beyond their scope of vision and control, yet still must claim capability and accountability to push through and reach the performance levels desired and demanded by all stakeholders. As College Access Programs incorporate the guidelines described in this brief, their role transforms into one that offers vision and inspiration to those who for too long have been forced to stare at their feet rather than keep their eyes upon the journey ahead – student and staff alike.
Winning Characteristics for College Access Programs to Bring to priority schools

A desire to earn the right to be considered part of the school’s team:

• The initiative to “walk in the shoes of the school”
• Be self-sufficient and “low maintenance”.
• Jump in when and where needed and not wait to be asked
• Commit to connect with all types of students, especially those who are quiet, resistant, or cantankerous
• A high level of organizational and proactive planning
• Know, in detail, the school’s performance goals and recent performance trends
• Have a data-minded orientation with skills of analysis
• Pursue connections with students and community outside of school grounds and school hours
• Present a default appreciation and respect for all members of a school staff, both in the classroom and beyond

When things are going well for the College Access Program, push harder in ways that support the school and the program:

• Advocate for changes in accountability measures to benefit schools working most intensely with large concentrations of LIFG students and other students who statistically carry high risk factors for dropping out
• Host meetings, conferences, and professional development with other school partners to bring them up to speed on school and student performance and explore ways collaboration could benefit all
• Campaign to re-frame negativity about the school in the media. “The school isn’t failing its students; it’s doing meaningful work with students who have enrolled with significant gaps in their knowledge and experience.”
What Does the Term College Access Programs Include?

The term “College Access Programs” refers to a range of governmentally and privately-funded programs that have as their purpose preparing low-income students, first-generation students and minority students for college—and assisting them in applying for and securing financial aid. Many College Access Programs begin working with students in middle school, while others begin their interventions when students are in high school.

The oldest continually-operating College Access Programs are the federally-supported TRIO Talent Search and TRIO Upward Bound programs which together serve over 370,000 students annually. A second set of federal College Access Programs—that are hosted by states and partnerships of school districts, colleges, and community agencies— is GEAR UP. Several states fund pre-college efforts including California, New Jersey, and New York. A number of locally and governmentally-funded College Access Programs belong to the National College Access Network and a directory of these programs can be found at http://www.collegeaccess.org/accessprogramdirectory/search.aspx. Additionally, several particular approaches to college access are noted here. These include: AVID, http://www.avid.org/; College Summit, http://www.collegesummit.org/; locally-funded scholarship programs, Posse, www.possefoundation.org/; Promise Scholarship programs, Say Yes to Education, http://www.sayyestoeducation.org and College for Every Student, http://www.collegefes.org/.

1 More information about these programs, hosted by more than 850 colleges and community agencies in every state, can be found at: http://www.2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html.


What is GO College?

GO College is an innovative model for delivering college access services to entire schools that enroll high percentages of low-income students. GO College embeds college coaches—staff of local colleges or community agencies—on-site in these schools on a full-time basis. Relying heavily on shared data and community collaboration, GO College works to align in-school and out-of-school programming to improve student achievement. Its ultimate goal is to increase college access and success for all students at each GO College high school.

GO College was chosen as one of the initial Investing in Innovation (i3) programs of the U.S. Department of Education. Additional support is provided by the GE Foundation.

What is COE?

The Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) is a nonprofit organization, established in 1981, dedicated to furthering the expansion of college opportunities for low-income, first-generation students, and students with disabilities throughout the United States. Its membership includes more than 1,000 colleges and agencies.
Developed and Made Available Through Support from the GE Foundation

About the GE Foundation

The GE Foundation, the philanthropic organization of GE, is committed to building a world that works better. We empower people by helping them build the skills they need to succeed in a global economy. We equip communities with the technology and capacity to improve access to better health and education. We elevate ideas that are tackling the world’s toughest challenges to advance economic development and improve lives. The GE Foundation is powered by the generosity and talent of our employees, who have a strong commitment to their communities. We are at work making the world work better.