



July 16, 2012

## **Testimony**

**From: Lynn Seagren Bass, Principal, Tapestry Charter High School, Buffalo, NY**

**To: Governor Cuomo's Education Reform Commission, Area: Student Achievement and Parent Engagement**

## **A Message of Hope from a Charter High School in Buffalo**

### **SCHOOL FACTS:**

Tapestry Charter High School is authorized by Charter Schools Institute. Students are selected by blind lottery, with preference given to Buffalo City residents. In 2011-12 enrollment included 322 students, grades 9 to 12, with approximately 82 students per grade. Two-hundred forty applications were received for ninth grade entry in the Lottery of 2012, to fill 82 seats for fall 2012.

Using 2011-12 data as a sample, Tapestry Charter High School serves virtually all zip codes in Buffalo and enrolls students coming from middle school programs in BPS (38%), private/parochial schools (13%), Tapestry (13%) and other charter schools (37%).

For 2011-12, Tapestry Charter High School's demographics included:

- 71% Free/Reduced Lunch
- 12% CSE, 8% 504, 2% ELL
- 70% African American, 23% Caucasian, 6% Hispanic, 1% Other
- 93.2% average daily attendance

Based upon 2011-12 results from the Scholastic Reading Inventory, a research-based norm-referenced test of reading comprehension administered to all students twice yearly, 64% of our ninth grade students were below "Proficient" in reading upon entry to high school. In the previous cohort group, 67% entered below the Proficient level. Post-testing revealed consistent growth as more students entered the proficient category by year's end.

Tapestry Charter School budget functions with a state allocation of approximately \$12,000 per student, contrasting with a BPS allocation that provides thousands more dollars. In addition we are responsible for facilities costs to be paid from our allocations.

### **HISTORY AND OVERVIEW OF OUTCOMES:**

In September 2006 I had the pleasure of welcoming the very first class of fifty ninth graders into Tapestry Charter High School. Starting in November 2003, I was part of developing this locally grown school and was later selected as its first principal. Our development group had included parents and educators, and we worked closely with partners including Canisius College in Buffalo and the nationally-based professional development organization, Expeditionary Learning Schools (EL). We were encouraged by a grant of \$288,000 that we received in 2005 from the Gates Foundation that was made available through our partnership with EL.

Everyone who was part of the project emphatically believed that Buffalo's students could be far more successful than local public school outcomes suggested. All of us were grateful that the practitioners across the nation who modeled "best practices" were generous in sharing their ideas and their strategies. We borrowed freely from the

inspiring people who were demonstrating that success was possible for even the most challenged urban students. We appreciated the work of Deborah Meier, TheodoreSizer, and Richard DuFour, among others. We read, we visited, we talked, and we planned.

We maintained positive momentum, and that first group of students graduated proudly in June 2010. Of the fifty who graduated, ninety-eight percent earned local or Regents diplomas, including 14 Regents diplomas with Advanced designation, 27 - "regular" Regents diplomas, 8 - local diplomas, and one - IEP diploma. Thirty-four percent were students with disabilities, either CSE or 504. All applied to at least one four-year college, and all were accepted to two and/or four year college programs. The graduation ceremony was a peak life experience for those of us who started with only an inspired dream.

My own son was a part of the second graduating class of June 2011. Of the seventy-seven students who began senior year, seventy-one graduated (91%), including 8 Advanced Regents, 54 "regular" Regents diplomas, and 9 local diplomas. Of his graduating group, 20% were students with disabilities (CSE or 504). Again, all seniors applied to college in the fall, and all were accepted at least into a two-year institution.

The graduation of June 2012 included seventy-four students of the 77 who began senior year (96%), with 16 earning Advanced Regents diplomas, 49 "regular" Regents diplomas, and 9 local diplomas. Of the graduating group, 20% were students with disabilities. One additional disabled student continues now in summer school to try again to pass the US History Regents exam, without which she cannot earn a diploma. The two other non-graduates who began as seniors withdrew from school after refusing to continue engagement in drug treatment. One recently indicated that he has enrolled in a suburban high school for September. The practice of guiding all seniors to apply to college has continued, and all were accepted into at least one two-year institution.

Tapestry's Professional Learning Community considers the parents and students to be the customers of their service. This perspective is reflected in the day-to-day treatment of students and families, as well as in the satisfaction surveys administered to families and students. The Family Surveys were completed at the time of the Student Led Conferences in December at the end of the first trimester, when 286 of 315 families attended conferences (91% representation). Of the attendees, 253 families completed the survey in full. Regarding "overall impression" of the school, 99.6% of respondents rated Satisfied or Very Satisfied. Only four percent or fewer rated "Somewhat..." or "Very Dissatisfied" with any category. The vast majority (over 80%) reported being "Very Satisfied" with all aspects of the school that were asked about, including instructional quality, school safety, school culture, and administrative management. When students were surveyed in April, ninety percent of the students participated in the anonymous rating of overall school functioning as well as specific course satisfaction. The vast majority of students felt that "the school offers a good academic program" (94%), that "the staff care about students" (93%), and that "teachers are available and helpful" (89%). Students strongly endorsed the Expeditionary Learning structures that are a fundamental part of the program, including Learning Expeditions, and "Intensives" that brought them out into the community for learning projects in March. The results of these surveys in 2011-12 provided affirmation of the school's efforts to meet the needs of our customers.

The positive results of Tapestry's efforts over the last six years demonstrate that students representing the general population of the city of Buffalo can graduate in respectable numbers. They can be encouraged to move toward higher education. Parents can be welcomed in and engaged. The rich experience of this charter high school has absolutely given me confidence that such results are replicable. We were never doing anything magical, but rather lifting good ideas from those who had gone before and those who continue to study educational practices. What follows are the structures that I believe have played a key role in our success.

## **REPLICABLE STRUCTURES FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS:**

**Autonomy of governance** – As a leader I have reasonable control over the program Tapestry High School delivers and the hiring and termination of staff. The board of Tapestry is supportive, without micromanaging.

**Small School community in which each child is known well** – Based on the number of enrolled students and our philosophy and structures, we are considered a “Small School.” This means that all students are personally known, supported, and held accountable. Class sizes are held to an average of 18 to 20, with many smaller than that.

**Crew/Advisory** – Each student is placed in a group of 12 students for an advisory period daily, remaining together as a cohesive group throughout the four years of high school. From the first Freshman Orientation, the Crew accomplishes the goal of helping students to become acquainted and appreciate each other and the staff, while recognizing our interdependence as a community and our priorities including strong academic achievement and good character. Crew leaders at all grade levels reach out personally to parents from the summer before the year even begins. The Crew leader is responsible for calling each parent to attend the Student-Led-Conferences in which students privately present school portfolio progress in a family meeting. Crew serves to:

- Reinforce school culture expectations
- Reinforce academic expectations
- Reinforce college preparation expectations
- Create close parent school connection

**Staff membership in a Professional Learning Community (PLC)** – Drawing from the work of Dufour, staff have been trained in and adhere to the values of a PLC, including: Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals; Collaborative Teams; Collective Inquiry; Action Orientation and Experimentation; Continuous Improvement; and Results Orientation. Collaborative Teams include grade level groups representing all core and support subject teachers who serve the same children.

**Instructional Leadership Council (ILC)** – Teachers are asked to serve in leadership roles at the department and grade team levels, and these lead teachers then become part of the ILC that meets regularly with the principal throughout the year. This group, which represents teachers democratically, discusses policies, procedures, and school functioning at all levels and problem solves as needed. The ILC reviews results of surveys that are completed by all staff regarding the implementation of Expeditionary Learning practices and impressions of the functioning of administration.

**Principal’s Advisory Group (PAG)** – From the school’s opening, parents served in an active advisory capacity and they comprise the dominant membership of PAG, along with a smaller representation of teachers and students. This group reviews policies and practices, and makes recommendations for school improvements. They review the Family Satisfaction Surveys yearly. Though they work with the Community Association on fundraising, their role is governance.

**Student Government** – Each Crew is each represented in the student government structure, which was written and ratified by the students two years ago. The student representatives elect leadership who meet regularly with the principal regarding all issues of interest and/or concern. Students have the opportunity to review the design of and results from student surveys.

**Restorative Justice approach to discipline** – Tapestry approaches discipline in a manner consistent with Restorative Justice practices, acknowledging the interdependence of members of the community and the importance of preserving and building relationships. Students are guided to repair relationships when they are offended with a goal of developing conscience and compassion.

**Collaboration with external resources** – Tapestry values input from external community and national resources, who provide expertise and consultation for staff and who provide resources from which students indirectly and

directly benefit. Strong relationships have existed with higher education organizations, the arts community, and service organizations. A small sample includes:

- Expeditionary Learning Schools
- Western NY Service Collaborative (formerly WNYAmeriCorps)
- Canisius College
- Buffalo State College
- Niagara University
- Journey's End Refugee Services
- International Institute of Buffalo
- Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities
- Green Options, Buffalo

Background of Lynn Seagren Bass:

- 1982 - 1996– Entered public education in Cleveland Hill District, first ring suburb of Buffalo. Served as school psychologist for seven years, then Director of Pupil Services for seven years.
- 1995 - 2006 – Became Parent Representative on School Based Management Team for Olmsted School, later serving as a parent member on the Buffalo Public Schools District Parent Coordinating Council, formed from SBMT reps in 2000. Served as parent member on Closing the Gap Committee convened by Robert Bennett to explore collaboration of schools and community resources.
- 1996 - 2006– Transferred to work for Buffalo Public Schools as school psychologist for CSE. Served as school psychologist on district committee examining “select schools” and “gifted and talented” program selection process.
- 2006 – present – Serve as principal of Tapestry Charter High School, after working from 2003 on developing HS concept and school plan as extension of Tapestry Charter’s elementary program, which opened in 2001.

Masters in Family Systems Theory, Hahnemann Medical College Graduate School, Philadelphia, 1981

Masters in Clinical and Community Psychology, UB, 1982

Certificate of Advanced Study in Educational Administration & Supervision, Buffalo State College, 1989

NYS Teacher Certification: School Psychology, School District Leader