

Breaking THE POVERTY BARRIER

CHANGING STUDENT LIVES WITH
PASSION, PERSEVERANCE,
AND PERFORMANCE

© Hawker Brownlow Education
RICARDO LEBLANC-ESPARZA & WILLIAM S. ROULSTON



TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS.	xi
PREFACE.	xiii
INTRODUCTION.	1
<i>Chapter 1</i>	
FROM NOT-SO-GOOD TO GREAT	3
<i>Chapter 2</i>	
LEADING THE TURNAROUND.	7
Leadership and Core Beliefs	8
Core Belief 1	10
Core Belief 2	11
Core Belief 3	12
Core Belief 4	13
Core Belief 5	22
Core Belief 6	25
Core Belief 7	27
Core Belief 8	29
Will All of This Really Work?	30
<i>Chapter 3</i>	
PARENT ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES	31
What's Wrong With That Mom?	33
The Old Communication System	37
Changing the Communication System	42
The Implementation of Our New Communication System	47
Results of Our New System	57
Results Greater Than the Numbers.	59
The Real Reason Behind Our Success	64

Chapter 4

MENTORSHIP. 65

Why Advisories? 65
 The Math of Mentorship 66
 Development of Our Mentorship Program 67
 Our Mentorship Program Curriculum 71
 The Essence of Advisories 80

Chapter 5

OUR READING INTERVENTION 83

An All-Too-Common Story 83
 A Classroom Full of Fernandas 84
 Data Points: Before and After Intervention 85
 Our Readers 90
 Turning Around Struggling Adolescent Readers. 91
 The Rewire Reading Setup 93
 Rewire Step-by-Step 98
 Avoiding Program Problems 106
 Summary 109

Chapter 6

OTHER INTERVENTIONS 111

English Curriculum. 111
 Comprehensive Literacy Program 115
 Thinking Maps 120
 Extended Learning Time 122
 Math Interventions 132
 The Key to Success in Any Intervention 135

Chapter 7

TURNAROUND FROM THE INSIDE OUT 137

(Almost) All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Traffic Safety. 137
 The Power of Belief and Internal Reality 140
 Motivating Students 142
 Replacing Negative Traditions 163
 Changing the Reputation. 168
 Celebrating Success 170

Chapter 8

WILL THE GRANGER MODEL WORK IN ANY SCHOOL?	173
The Reality-Based Road Map	173
Guiding Questions	174
Why We Need to Change.	175
The Best Road Map for Ending Poverty?	177
Call to Action.	177
APPENDIX	179
REFERENCES	183

© Hawker Brownlow Education

INTRODUCTION

A *New York Times* article dated August 10, 2010, stated that the U.S. government “has sharply increased federal financing for school turnarounds, to \$3.5 billion this year, about 28 times as much as in 2007. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is pushing to overhaul 5,000 of the nation’s 100,000 public schools in the next few years.” But the article highlights a problem: “Companies with little or no experience are portraying themselves as school-turnaround experts as they compete for the money” (Dillon, 2010).

That’s understandable. The demand for help is great, and few service providers have seen their ideas turned into reality in actual school buildings. Most providers haven’t had their hands directly on the controls of a failing school, and most haven’t shown by their test data that they know how to turn it around.

Will Roulston and I were fortunate enough to have participated in a school turnaround process that changed the lives of students who otherwise would have likely been sentenced to a life of poverty. Granger High School was a public, open-enrollment high school in which 90 percent of the students participated in the free and reduced lunch program and in which 90 percent of the students were students of color. Because of the turnaround, many students became the first high school graduates in their families, and a large number of graduates went on to postsecondary education and good careers. With diplomas in hand, these former students are now breaking the cycle of poverty that they were born into.

And that is the prime motivation that drove us to write. We want to help all students succeed, even the most impoverished students who challenge our educational systems so greatly. Here are some of the ways in which we helped turn around exactly those kinds of students:

- We developed strong leadership that got people working together.
- We involved parents in managing their children’s education.
- We mentored students to make sure they knew why they were studying.
- We used data to determine what we needed to do better and implemented strategic literacy interventions, schoolwide instructional strategies suited for our population, and professional learning communities for staff.
- We transformed negative belief systems and created a culture of success.

If you find yourself leading or teaching in a school that needs improved achievement results and increased graduation rates, welcome aboard. We hope you find this book different from most books on the subject of school turnarounds. We love the inspirational stories about educators' journeys, but those stories leave us woefully short of understanding the specific strategies that made the journey possible. And unfortunately, the how-to books don't provide the critical, gritty stories that reveal the insights and aha moments, the fine distinctions that get to the heart of the matter and show how seemingly similar strategies are really quite different in effectiveness. That's why this book is a hybrid of a journey story and a how-to book.

In chapter 1, we explain why our school was considered a failing school. We detail how low we started and then show you how high we climbed in the process of our turnaround. Chapter 2 describes the serious business of leadership: the kind needed for the job of turning around a low-performing school and how it can be developed through adopting the critical core beliefs that lie at the heart of effective leadership. Chapter 3 details how to get students and their parents to join your staff in an unstoppable team that supports student achievement, explaining the simple, replicable strategies we used to make progress toward success. Chapter 4 describes why our school needed a mentorship program and explains how it worked.

Chapter 5 contains a detailed explanation of our primary reading intervention, Rewire Reading. Readers interested in building a similar customized approach will find this chapter to be a wealth of information because it both unlocks the strategies used and links them to theoretical models of why readers struggle, particularly older students. Chapter 6 is a collection of other interventions we implemented—our revamped English curriculum, the other two prongs of our three-pronged literacy program, the use of one specific strategy across the curriculum to improve learning for all our students, and extended learning time and built-in mechanisms to make sure students were working hard, both in class and out.

Chapter 7 focuses on an oft-neglected side of turning around any school or organization: creating change from the inside out. This chapter details the importance of changing the negative beliefs, attitudes, and traditions in a failing school and then shows the steps taken to actually accomplish it. Chapter 8 explores how our turnaround strategy is applicable to schools that are different from ours and presents a series of guiding questions to use in planning your own turnaround. The appendix includes a few reproducible letters we mention throughout the book. Visit **go.hbe.com.au** to download the reproducibles and for an outline of the book that will assist you in creating plans for your own turnaround efforts.

Results of Our New System

The powerful potential of the new system was easy to anticipate. But what were the results when we actually implemented the system in the real world? See figure 3.9.

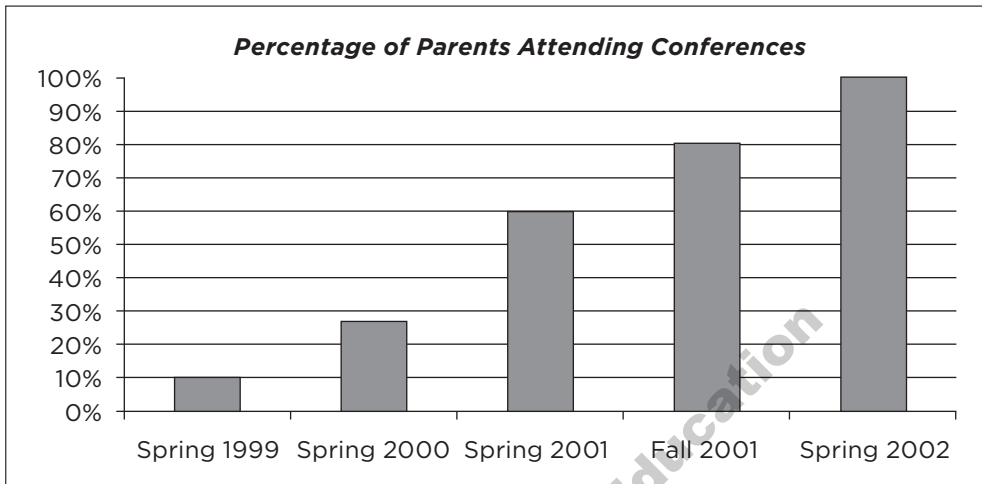


Figure 3.9: The improvement in our parent engagement.

Remember that in the spring of 2000, we had switched to evening conferences and had completed our home visitations. The results were disappointing: 27 percent of parents attended the conferences. It took us until the spring of 2001 to put the pieces in place for our new communication system, but when we implemented it, we immediately jumped to roughly a 60 percent participation level—a huge improvement to be sure, but not yet where we wanted to be. Still, I predicted that we were on the right path. You cannot break down a culture of disengagement in one year. I thought the students and parents who were afraid of the new system needed time to talk to people who had actually attended conferences. When parents heard from their family, friends, and neighbors that these new conferences were a good thing, they would decide to come the next time.

My prediction proved true. The next fall, we hit about 80 percent attendance without making any significant changes to the system and without making a greater effort to persuade the parents to come. But as I analyzed which parents did not attend conferences in the fall of 2001—the missing 20 percent—and looked at the academic records of their kids, I realized they all had an uncanny resemblance to the family who had inspired our new system a year and a half earlier: Mrs. Cordoba and son.

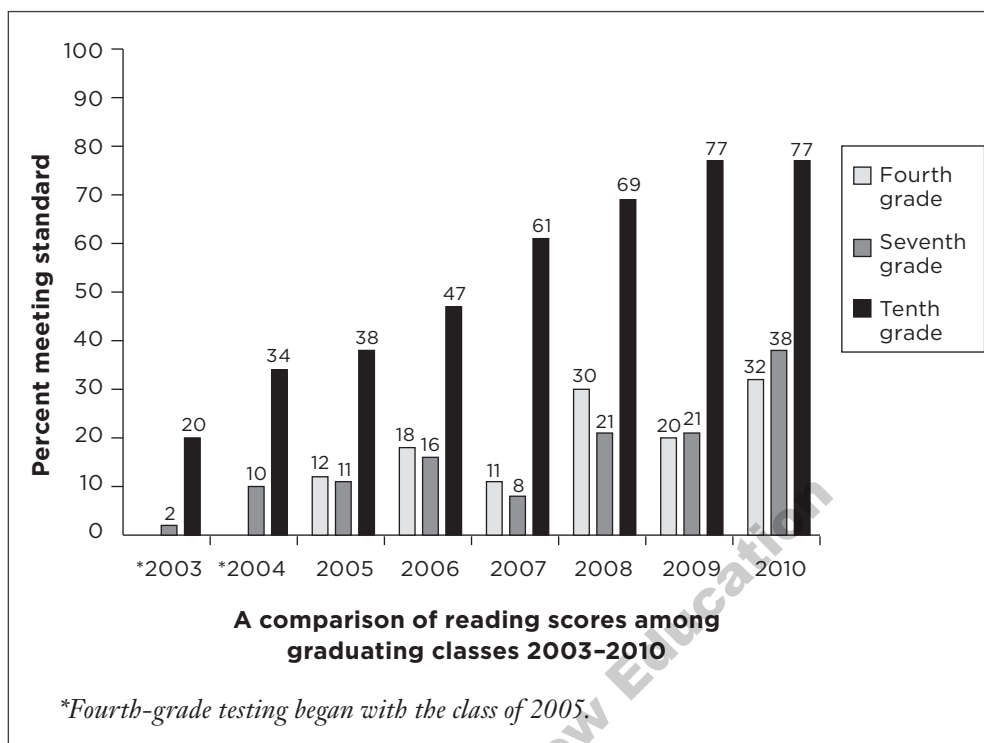


Figure 5.1: Improvement in our students' WASL reading scores over the years.

Perhaps a better measure of effectiveness is to look at our scores compared to the average passing rate of all students in Washington over the same time period (see fig. 5.2). The results show that although there was general improvement for all students taking the test, our students improved at a much faster rate. Remember our demographics: 90 percent free and reduced lunch and 90 percent students of color. By the time the class of 2007 took the WASL in the spring of 2009, they were performing at nearly the same level as the average of all students in our state. We had effectively closed the achievement gap in reading.

The story in writing proficiency (see fig. 5.3) looks fairly similar to our reading improvement. After several years of rapid growth, we seemed to level off at 67 percent of our sophomores meeting standard in writing, still a sizable increase from their earlier performance. Although we continued to implement more interventions aimed at writing in subsequent years, the summary writing part of the Rewire Reading curriculum was the one constant intervention aimed at writing through all the years represented on the graph shown in figure 5.3.

Another result of our Rewire intervention was classroom teachers reporting that students were approaching reading and writing with more confidence. Some reported that students would volunteer to read aloud in front of the whole class—a significant breakthrough for students who had been cowed into silence for so many years

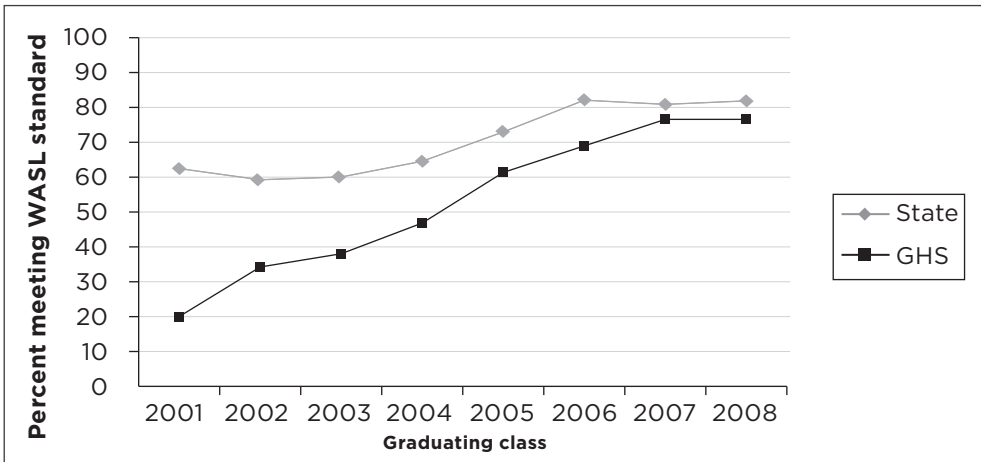


Figure 5.2: Reading scores: Granger students versus all students in Washington.

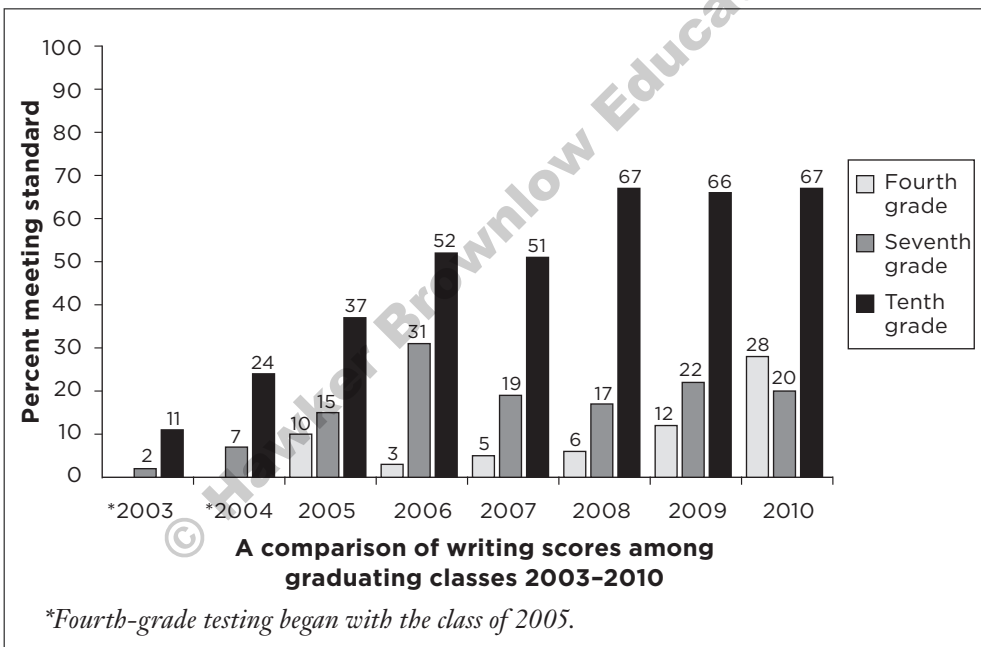


Figure 5.3: Improvement in our students' writing scores over the years.

because of their reading disability. Other teachers noted that Rewire students involved in group projects, especially ones that required reading, were participating more in the activities than they had previously. Still other teachers reported that when students had to read individually in class, they would get right to it, tracking all the way.

Our results go against the interpretation of research made by Kati Haycock of the Education Trust. Haycock's research showed that a student who has two ineffective

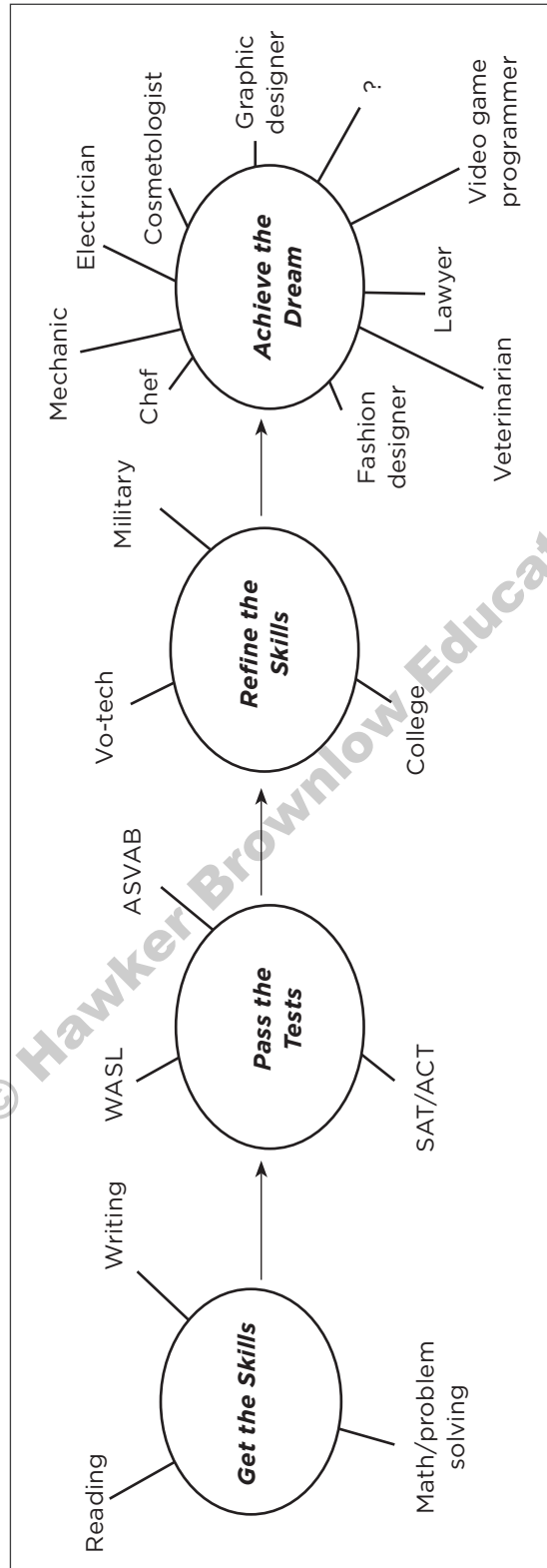


Figure 7.1: The power of education.