

On March 13<sup>th</sup>, Laurence Harmon published a feature in the Boston Globe describing how success at South Boston's new charter school, Unlocking Potential ("UP") Academy, could change the terms of the education debate in America. He supported this narrative with sweeping generalizations about the quality of teaching currently available to Boston Public School students and a few quotes from UP founder and CEO Scott Given. As a current teacher at the PF Gavin Middle School, the current school that UP will replace, I want to make sure that the "facts on the ground" go down on the public record, because they paint a picture that is quite different from the one Harmon describes.

Here is the result of my "fact checking" on Harmon's behalf.

*"... poorly performing Gavin Middle School..."*

My heart goes out to Josie and her mother, and I wish them all of the luck in the world in finding the right educational environment for their needs. However, I do want to point out that, had Josie attended the Gavin, she would have likely received a math education that compares favorably to most other public options in Boston:

- Gavin math students outperformed the BPS average on the MCAS last year according to the state's Comprehensive Performance Index (CPI).
- The average Gavin student showed more improvement than 60% of their peers statewide on the MCAS last year, according to the state's "student growth percentile" metric.
- This performance was recognized at both the state and federal level. The Gavin is the only BPS middle school to make "AYP" – Adequate Yearly Progress – in math for at least the last three years.

Every mainstream public middle school in Boston is "poorly performing" because they have failed to make AYP for two consecutive years, and are therefore designated as "restructuring" by the state. While I am not saying that the Gavin is generating the kind of aggregate outcomes any of us want to see consistently, it is by most every measure outperforming its urban peers in math. As a proxy for what is obviously system-wide failure, the Gavin is a poor choice.

*"...Unlocking Potential, a nonprofit charter school management organization that specializes in resuscitating failed schools."*

While "resuscitating failed schools" is a worthy goal, will someone please point out the fact that the organization has never actually done it? Their institutional history includes just one year of planning and hiring activities. They derive all of their institutional credibility from founder Scott Given's resume, which in turn rests on having turned around the charter school "Excel Academy." While this was quite an achievement, Excel had fewer than 200 students at the time with only 10% or so receiving special education services. The Gavin, with 500 students, a third of whom receive special education services, is a vastly different environment. Given (who as CEO of UP will not have a day to day role in the school) and his team are undoubtedly smart, well-intentioned people, and they will work hard to create a great learning environment; but according to a significant recent study, only 17% of charter schools outperform their public school counterparts, and many fail completely in their first few years. The education of my current sixth and seventh grade special education students, with whom the UP administrators have little to no experience, is at the mercy of their learning curve. UP

has a lot to prove quickly, the stakes are high, and the short-term outcome — the outcome for my students, who will experience UP in its first year — is not so clear as this feature piece makes out.

*“Critics complain that charter schools attract the best students, leaving special-needs students and non-native English speakers behind. But Unlocking Potential is determined to put that argument to rest....”*

91% of current sixth graders and seventh graders choosing to stay represents a hard-won logistical victory on the part of UP.

Special education and English language learners are expensive to teach and fail to fit easily into the rigid remedial academic systems that many charter schools favor. That is why the percentage of the Gavin’s current population receiving those services is triple that of the Excel Academy, Given’s former school. Alarming, Boston Public Schools never required UP to put together a plan for these students before handing them the keys – which, as a special education teacher, I find criminally negligent – but the planning team for the new school has since devoted much time and effort to the task. While UP remains a new, untested organization and therefore has no experience serving large numbers of these students, they have made every effort to adjust their plans to the Gavin’s current population. They also have the resources to throw money at any contingencies they run into next year. Time will tell whether this will be enough to overcome their inevitable learning curve, but it will be no slam dunk.

Most important to making direct comparisons between charter schools and their public school counterparts, there is an educational truism to consider: it takes very few kids to strain the best of educational systems, especially those schools in Boston that are understaffed and under-resourced like the Gavin. The Gavin’s current internal data shows that just 6% of our 150 sixth graders account for 45% of the school’s most significant disciplinary interventions. 2% of students have disrupted instruction to the point that they’ve had to be removed from class twenty-five times or more each in the last five months. Those disruptions account for hundreds of hours in teacher, administrator and student time that would otherwise be devoted to instruction, and have a profound impact on climate and culture school-wide. If UP recruits, maintains and educates those students while boosting the scores of everyone else, then they could truly claim that they teach all comers, fulfilling the most basic mission of public education. It would be an enormous achievement, worthy of changing the terms of the educational debate. If, on the other hand, those 6% fail to either enter the institution year after year (remember, with each year the Gavin’s current population is diluted out by families that opt their children in) and/or become victims of attrition, then this will not be an “apples to apples” comparison and the debate will not have moved forward one iota. I know that UP has met with mixed success in convincing these students to stay; to their credit – and I mean that – they have tried.

*“...If relatively inexperienced teachers can do what veterans can’t – namely turn around a school where only one out of four students performs at grade level – then a public cry for longer school days, merit pay, and stricter teaching evaluations will grow louder.”*

As I understand UP’s plans, they are going to differentiate themselves from other BPS

schools in five ways:

- First, UP is going to staff itself adequately, even luxuriously. Every core subject area will have classes capped at 27 students; the Gavin's teachers have wrestled with homerooms as large as 37 since September of this year. Perhaps more importantly, UP's teachers will be responsible for only 54 students in total; current Gavin math teachers are responsible for over 90, while our writing and workshop teachers can see as many as 115 throughout the day. UP special education teachers will have a caseload of approximately 20 students; as a special educator currently at the Gavin, I have a caseload of 50 kids. At the administrative level, UP will have not only a principal but 3 full time deans and an operations manager; the Gavin administration included just the principal to begin the year for about 500 students, though an assistant principal was added shortly after school started. I suspect that UP's quantity of educators will be far, far more striking than any difference in quality.
- The district is allowing UP to isolate itself from Boston Public School's "operational chaos," giving UP the freedom to plan and fund its own staffing, operations, and student intake. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this independence. For example, BPS severely underfunded and understaffed the Gavin to begin the year, meaning that the 32 to 37 students in each homeroom lacked sufficient desks to sit in when they showed up in September. This was despite stable, longstanding enrollment that made student numbers easy to project. The district belatedly restored funding for the Gavin to bring the teacher to student ratio back to what is legal by December, but the delayed and piecemeal nature of those additions continues to hamstring our efforts to provide equal educational opportunities to students and staff. Independence from the district also means that UP is insulated from the numerous student additions that occur throughout the year in Boston. Overwhelmingly, the couple of dozen students who enter the Gavin during the school year (though strangely, not this year) come following negative experiences elsewhere, either due to expulsion or through the softer means of "pushing out" that the city's public, private and charter schools engage in. The Gavin has traditionally been a "good district citizen," absorbing and acclimating these students, though they are constant source of strain to the stability and climate of the school. UP will not have to deal with these kids – instead, those transfers will simply go to the shrinking pool of public schools (possibly destabilizing them further).
- UP will have an uncompromising and universal discipline system. This is where the difference in teaching philosophy between the "veteran teachers of the Gavin" and UP's new cohort really lies. UP's is not a new or especially novel system, since many charter schools, both high performing and low performing, claim to use it. The question of whether it is appropriate for every student at the Gavin, or if it will be exhausted by the 6% of students mentioned above, is an interesting one, and is the crucial to UP's theory of action. Many teachers presently at the Gavin recoil at the idea of controlling individual students to the point of issuing them "demerits," adding up to detentions, if their eyes stray out of a window. Certainly, successful schools for the affluent don't think that sort of compulsion is necessary.
- UP will extend the school day for its students. The Gavin's current administration applied for extended day programming two years ago, but Boston Public Schools turned them down, likely due to expense.

- Finally, having removed many of the distractions that make actually delivering instruction difficult, UP will have the power to hire, financially reward, and fire teachers as it sees fit, using criteria of its own choosing.

So, to recap: if UP is successful, the public will have reason to clamor for (1) sufficient staffing of schools; (2) isolation of schools from the district's sometimes necessary but always destructive penny-pinching, glacial bureaucracy, and reshuffling of students who have had bad experiences in previous placements; (3) the institution of a discipline system that is both controversial and unproven in an environment that needs to teach and retain everyone; (4) extending the school day, which many of the city's existing schools have been unable to do for lack of funds; and (5) teachers judged by performance in a school where, if UP's year goes as planned, many of the variables that make their lives so difficult are taken off of the table. That's a conversation I'd love to be a part of, and I know for a fact that many teachers feel the same way.

*"Given said it was unlikely that even a single veteran teacher at the Gavin will be rehired in the fall."*

Only four of approximately forty Gavin teachers applied for positions at UP. Most chose not to submit their resume out of a sense of professional pride. Imagine choosing to work in an urban middle school with high poverty rates – the most challenging educational environment out there – and investing your time, energy and ambition in turning it around. You begin to show results, even raising performance above the district average in math. You are then fired, and given the choice of (1) staying with an untested organization with an unknown boss (UP's new principal was only hired in January, after the hiring cycle) where the only certainty was less compensation; or (2) going to a new institution where your professional efforts are explicitly valued. Boston principals have already begun to "poach" the Gavin's most talented teachers for the coming year, even before they received their budgets, and that pace will surely accelerate as more positions open up. UP didn't close the door on most of the Gavin's teachers; the overwhelming majority of Gavin's teachers made a rational decision to move on.

Mr. Harmon: paid circulation of the Globe has been in decline for years. The organization has seen some success in attracting readers online, but has not figured out how to fully monetize that audience and therefore return to the good old days of revenue growth. I would never, ever insinuate that success or failure of your "poorly performing" newspaper is due to yours and your peers' personal, even moral failure to "do whatever it takes." To publicize that message would be insulting. It would also be dense, since the story of newspaper media's decline in this country over the past decade reflects broad economic, technological, and cultural trends. To suggest that it would take only a change in personnel to reverse that narrative is idiotic. There are much richer, much more relevant angles of that story to bring to the public.

Lastly, I just want to say this: I am proud to have worked at the Gavin over these past two and a half years. Last year, our math team maxed out efforts to raise student achievement: we organized and carried out two-hour long afterschool programs that extended the school day for our neediest students; we experimented with new assessment and data collection systems, investing the hours of unpaid time it took to integrate these new resources into our lessons and curriculum; we paid out of pocket for new teaching technologies, sometimes to

the tune of hundreds of dollars, delivering livelier and more engaging lessons to our students. Teaching when done well is always a difficult job, but over the 2009/10 school year, 12-hour days and working straight through Saturday and Sunday were the norms. This was without the promise of merit pay and performance bonuses (as a former consultant during the boom times of the early decade, I am very familiar with those sources of motivation – yet they were not necessary here). We saw the results of our efforts in our students' double-digit test gains, and looked forward to building on that success in 2010/11. Instead, we were fired. Worse, the district has publicly downplayed or ignored our achievements, feeding talking points to the media that imply our efforts resulted in nothing more than abject failure. Journalists have reported these talking points as the whole story, doing no fact checking of their own, sending zero – zero! – journalists to actually lay eyeballs on the demise of one of the city's older and more historic schools. Despite all that, Gavin teachers and administrators show up every day, putting in the hours before and after the teaching day that are so necessary to maintain and build upon last year's test gains, and even investing some of their own time and energy to help facilitate the transition to UP. I'm proud to be an educator here. Not in BPS, not after this year, but I am proud to have worked with the staff of the Gavin.