



Turning Crisis into Opportunity

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By thinking strategically, two schools show how to do more with less.

The pressure on educators today is tremendous—performance targets grow each year while resources shrink. Faced with budget deficits, district administrators generally keep existing school structures intact while trimming funding for items deemed nonessential, such as preschool, professional development, and central office departments. Unfortunately, cutting these supposedly nonessential items may actually harm the bottom line in the long term. Moreover, cuts like these leave our classrooms looking essentially the same as they did 50 years ago. The question before us is whether we can use this period of crisis as an opportunity to rethink what schools can look like.

At Education Resource Strategies, we've worked with school districts around the United States with spending levels ranging from \$8,000 to more than \$20,000 per pupil, and at every spending level we see examples of effective schools. These schools start with a clear vision and instructional model, and they align all their resources and attention around it. Perhaps most important, these schools know how to adapt. They monitor what is and isn't working, and if something isn't working they change it.

This flexible, strategic approach may seem self-evident, but schools often have trouble putting it into practice. Vestiges of earlier reforms and well-intentioned policies intercede. Also, schools typically make decisions one at a time as the need arises, rather than in concert. As a result, schools do not always recognize the trade-offs inherent in any design decision and end up with a piecemeal rather than comprehensive approach. This problem is exacerbated when schools lack a clearly defined and agreed-on instructional model to align resources around.

There is a wide range of variation in how high-performing schools coordinate their resources, but we have nevertheless identified three common areas of focus that they seem to share: investing in teaching quality, giving students individual attention, and maximizing the use of time. Two schools that stand out in these areas are City High, a charter school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Ashley Park, a traditional elementary school in Charlotte, North Carolina. Both have shown strong results with low-income and minority students, and neither receives significant extra resources.¹

City Charter High School: Reimagining the Teaching Job

City High started nine years ago and serves about 600 students in grades 9–12. It has won *U.S. News and World Report's* bronze medal of distinction for leading U.S. high schools three years in a row. The student

population is about half black and half white, 60 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 11 percent receive special education services. City High receives the same level of funding as other Pittsburgh schools—about \$10,000 per pupil.

The school has given itself the freedom to reinvent how instruction is organized, how teachers work, how students and teachers are grouped, and how time is used.

Investing in Teaching Quality

City High does not pay teachers more than surrounding district schools on average, but it is quite deliberate about whom it hires, how teachers are coached and evaluated, and how teachers are compensated. The school's interview process ensures that it hires the best applicants. School leaders have created an environment that good teachers want to be part of, and they offer salaries that are competitive with district schools.

The school has developed a teacher career path with four levels: apprentice, journeyman, expert, and master. A detailed rubric lays out core competencies and describes what effective teaching looks like at each level; teachers initiate an intensive review process when they feel ready to move to the next level. Compensation is based on career level, so it is tied to demonstrated competencies rather than seniority and education credits. Teachers develop their skills with the support of principals, coaches, and teachers on the expert tier.

Teachers are assigned to teams and jobs in a way that balances expertise, such as by pairing novice teachers with expert teachers and using coteaching so that teachers can learn from one another. Instructional coaches, master teachers, and building administrators observe lessons regularly and provide feedback.

Teachers are organized into one team per grade, with 10 teachers and several paraprofessionals serving the 156 students in the grade. Team members have 2.5 hours of planning time together every day, in which they analyze data, plan lessons together, talk about students, and call parents. Teachers use formative assessment data to track student progress, and they create individual support plans for every student who is not on track to graduate. Students take electives while content teachers plan.

Giving Students Individual Attention

City High has larger average class sizes than most traditional Pittsburgh schools (around 25–28 students), but it is organized in ways that cultivate a close relationship between teachers and students and allow for a great deal of individual and small-group instruction in response to learning needs. For example, English and social studies are combined into an interdisciplinary humanities block, with 56 students taught together in one big room with an English teacher, a social studies teacher, a special education teacher, and at least one paraprofessional. This configuration enables the teachers to flexibly create small groups and differentiate instruction for students.

City High students stay with the same core group of teachers through all four years of high school. This system, known as looping, helps teachers develop deep relationships with their students, know their learning styles, differentiate instruction more successfully, and spend less time on classroom management. Looping is particularly cost-effective because it fosters stronger student-adult relationships without requiring additional time or preparation, unlike mentoring or advisory periods.

Critics sometimes protest that it can be difficult for teachers to master more than one year of content knowledge in their subject, and City High teachers did report that it was a challenge to develop the content knowledge they needed the first time they went through the loop. However, by the end of the loop, they felt that their depth of expertise was improved, and they now approach their discipline as a continuous spectrum of skills.

Maximizing the Use of Time

City High students go to school year-round, but the number of days in the school year is similar to that of other Pittsburgh schools (186 days at City High, compared with 182 in district schools). The year is divided into trimesters, with a monthlong break at the end of each trimester. The length of courses varies: Some courses are two trimesters long, others are just a single trimester, and electives are often a half-block.

The school day runs from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., an eight-hour day that is about an hour longer than the school day of most Pittsburgh high schools. Instructional time is divided into three 2.5-hour blocks, which enables students to engage in project-based learning. For example, seniors spend two hours each day on an interdisciplinary research project, which they present at the end of the year to a review team that includes an outside expert. Juniors complete a 130-hour internship as a capstone to a career-exploration sequence that began in their freshman year.

This structure uses time effectively in several ways. First, the year-round trimester system limits the learning loss that typically occurs during the standard summer vacation, but because it does not change the total number of school days in the year it does not require additional resources.

Second, the use of blocks and integrated subjects allows for project-based learning, which often increases student engagement. Time on each activity can also vary by subject, unit, and student need. This degree of flexibility is often lost in traditional high school schedules, where instruction tends to be doled out in set increments, regardless of need.

Third, this structure, in which teachers teach during two blocks and plan during the third, gives teachers 2.5 hours of planning time per day, which is more than three times the amount of planning time district teachers typically have. City High teachers have time to do most of their planning and grading work during the school day, and they have more opportunities to collaborate.

Ashley Park PreK–8 School: The Family Model

Ashley Park is a 250-student elementary school in Charlotte, North Carolina, that primarily serves low-income, black students. The school has seen a rapid rise in test scores after it was designated as a turnaround school in 2009 and a new principal and core team of staff came in.

Investing in Teaching Quality

Ashley Park uses a "family model," in which teachers have joint ownership of all the students in a grade. For instance, instead of the two 3rd grade teachers being assigned 20 students each and spending their day behind closed classroom doors, the two teachers share responsibility for all 40 students. They work together to design the day around student needs, coteaching where appropriate or dividing the students into different size groups for different lessons. Teaching teams write common formative assessments that

they use regularly to check on student progress; assign students to groups; and see whether they require extra time for reteaching, tutoring, or intensive literacy support.

In addition, teachers have 90-minute collaborative planning sessions twice a week, led by an instructional facilitator. (Students are in back-to-back classes in music, art, and other specials at this time.) One of the weekly planning sessions focuses on examining student data and learning needs, and the other is for joint lesson planning. In addition to leading the collaborative planning sessions, the instructional facilitators work with teachers intensively when needed. One instructional facilitator position is standard in all Charlotte schools; the principal at Ashley Park created the other position by trading in two paraprofessional positions.

Giving Students Individual Attention

The school's family model is designed to ensure that all students get what they need. The school uses a push-in model in which special education teachers, teaching assistants, tutors, and instructional facilitators join the grade-level "family" for core subjects, so group sizes can vary from two students to more than 30. Teachers discuss student groupings and talk about individual student needs each week during their common planning time. For example, teachers might note that three children failed to grasp a particular concept on a formative assessment, discuss how they might teach it differently, and pull the children aside for lunchtime tutoring the next day.

Maximizing the Use of Time

Ashley Park creates long blocks of time in core subjects and uses flex time to strategically make the best of existing time. On a typical day, students at Ashley Park spend at least two hours on reading, writing, and literacy, and one hour on math. However, Ashley Park does not have an official master schedule, and teachers use time flexibly. Each week, teachers discuss the upcoming unit and student needs and then decide how to use time that week. As one of the instructional coaches put it, "If the formatives [test scores] come back and we see that the kids aren't reading where they should be, then we'll spend a whole day on that."

Ashley Park also relies on integrated subjects to get the most out of the school day. Science instruction is integrated with literacy, and literacy is integrated into all the special subjects (art, music, and gym). It's not unusual to walk into a gym class and find the teacher with a book in his hand.

Finding Resources in Tough Times

Many of the strategies these two schools employ do not require additional resources. Leveraging expert teachers, looping, using data to pinpoint student needs, grouping students flexibly, and using time more effectively require little more than a small investment in professional development, which is among the items often cut during budget crunches. Other approaches—such as extended-day programs, instructional facilitators, and tutoring—require more resources, or a different use of resources.

Where can schools find this money? Most school dollars go to staffing, so staffing is the first place to look. At City High, for example, administration is lean, and there are few positions without direct student contact. Are there administrative positions at your school that can be converted to instructional positions? Are there paraprofessional positions that might better be combined to pay an instructional coach or a teacher? Unless aides are used in ways that are integral to the school's instructional model, they are often

not as cost-effective as they may seem. Are there elective teaching positions that could be converted to core classroom positions to bring down class size or pay for a specialist to coteach or run small groups?

Many schools have already trimmed positions and have little leeway in changing the positions that remain. In that case, another place to free up dollars is class size. In an elementary school with 500 students, raising class sizes from 17–21 to 20–24 would result in an average savings of about \$300,000, enough to extend the school day by an hour or the school year by a month, fund several instructional coach positions, or bring in a partner to provide additional services. An alternative is to keep core class sizes the same but to raise elective class sizes by reducing the number of electives or sections offered.

Smaller classes are popular with teachers and parents, but they may not always be the most cost-effective strategy. Ask parents whether they would rather have a class of 15 with an average teacher or a class of 25 with an excellent teacher, and the consensus is generally for the latter. Increasing class sizes is not always an option; class sizes may already be maxed out, and small schools may not have the flexibility to combine classes. (If a school only has two classrooms per grade, it may not be feasible to cut a teacher position.) However, in many schools it is worth exploring.

For example, in Elgin, Illinois, the district realized that class sizes in grades 4 and 5 were significantly lower than the target size. The only way to raise class sizes to the target was to have mixed-grade classrooms for those grades. They implemented such classes across the district, grouping together students who had similar skill levels despite being different ages. Year-end results suggest that these students did as well as or better than students in single-grade classrooms.

Thinking Strategically

What makes a school strategic is not any one practice in particular, or even simply the sum of the parts; it is the deliberate approach to making trade-offs that support core instructional priorities and meet the particular needs of students and staff. It is unlikely that a struggling school could simply adopt the structure of a high-performing school wholesale and expect it to work.

When making decisions, schools need to examine their current resource use in light of their goals, instructional model, and student and staff needs, and think about what trade-offs make sense in their current context. There's no one right way to answer these questions, but we think the "[Strategies for Doing More with Less](#)" on p. 22 hold promise.

City High and Ashley Park have taken different approaches to implementing these strategies, but they have both been deliberate and strategic in their planning. By rearranging existing resources and focusing on their vision and instructional model, these schools have managed to do more without more. Transforming begins with reexamining things that have always been taken for granted, weeding out initiatives that no longer align with the school's main focus, and challenging the choruses of "we've always done it this way."

No single strategy works for all, and the strategy that works this year may not be the right one next year or even next semester, as the school situation changes. We need a mind-set of continual improvement. Budget constraints may actually force us to be more creative and think about resources in different ways. Let's take advantage of the opportunity before us.

Strategies for Doing More with Less

Invest in Teaching Quality

- Leverage existing teaching talent through strategic assignment to teams, leadership roles, subjects, and grades.
- Dismiss ineffective teachers who have not responded to professional development, and replace them with higher-potential teachers.
- Reconsider the role of every position in the building. Are all essential? Could any be repurposed to better support the school's mission?
- Link compensation to roles, responsibilities, and results.

Give Students Individual Attention

- Loop teachers with the same group of students for more than one year.
- Selectively reduce class sizes or teacher loads in key grades and subjects.
- Bring special education teachers, teachers of English language learners, and instructional aides into the classroom to help create small groups and coteach.
- Use data to track progress, and create individual support plans for students who are struggling.
- Provide social and emotional services for students through outside partnerships or clinics housed at the school.
- Incorporate technology and adaptive software so that students can rotate through large groups in the computer lab and small groups working intensively with a teacher.

Maximize the Use of Time

- Organize the school day into longer blocks of time for in-depth student learning.
- Build flex periods into the day for reteaching, enrichment, tutoring, or smallgroup work.
- Integrate subjects where appropriate. (For example, teach literacy throughout the curriculum or integrate science into literacy.)
- Extend time through partnerships with outside organizations or creative staffing, such as staggered staff schedules.
- Monitor time on task in the classroom, and adjust time use when needed.

Endnote

¹ City High initially received start-up funds but no longer receives substantial grant funding. Ashley Park is part of Charlotte's Strategic Staffing Initiative for turnaround schools; as part of this program, seven of its staff members receive incentive pay. For more information about the schools, see www.cityhigh.org for City High and http://erstrategies.org/resources/details/turn-around_in_action for Ashley Park.

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