

Profile: Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL)

OVERVIEW

The Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) is both an Educational Management Organization focused on turnaround schools and a teacher-training organization. Founded in 2001, its mission is to “improve student achievement in Chicago’s high-poverty, chronically failing schools through a disciplined transformation process, built on a foundation of specially trained AUSL teachers.” In AUSL’s early years, the organization focused solely on training teachers, but began managing turnaround schools in 2006 at the invitation of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). At time of writing, AUSL was under contract with CPS to operate 12 (in 2010-11) of its lowest-performing schools, serving students in grades pre-K through 12.¹ CPS gives AUSL the autonomy to manage these schools as AUSL sees fit, but holds AUSL accountable for results.²

Additionally, AUSL runs the Chicago Teacher Residency (CTR) program, through which it recruits, selects, and trains teacher “residents,” ideally for placement as teachers in AUSL schools. During the 12-month training period, residents complete field work and receive mentoring in an AUSL-managed “training academy.”³ Upon successful completion of the CTR program, residents earn a master’s degree and teaching certification. As of 2011, AUSL had trained over 430 teachers, with 86 percent of the last five years’ graduates still teaching in Chicago Public Schools (including AUSL-managed schools).

The two elements of AUSL’s model complement and support one another in several ways: The CTR program ensures a continual pipeline of trained teachers for AUSL-managed turnaround schools, while the schools serve as training academies for the residents. Also, the fact that many AUSL teachers are trained via the CTR program creates a consistent culture within and across turnaround schools.

QUICK FACTS

- **TYPE:** Turnaround schools operator and teacher training organization
- **NUMBER OF SCHOOLS:** 12 turnarounds (10 elementary schools and 2 high schools); 7 training academies
- **SIZE:** ~10,500 students served; ~100 residents trained per year
- **DEMOGRAPHICS:** 98% Free/Reduced Lunch; 11% Special Education; 4% English Language Learners
- **LOCATION:** Chicago
- **GENERAL ED FUNDING LEVEL (2009-10):** \$12,359 per pupil (includes \$11,536 as base from Chicago Public Schools plus \$823 in additional AUSL funding)
- **AVERAGE CORE CLASS SIZE:** 25 to 28

¹ AUSL-managed schools remain CPS schools during turnaround, and employees at those schools are all CPS employees. AUSL turnaround schools are neighborhood public schools, and any child living within a school’s attendance boundary is eligible to attend.

² AUSL explains: “AUSL collaborates with Chicago Public Schools through a performance contract, which grants AUSL the authority to make key decisions about people, programs, and policies in exchange for accountability for improved results.”

³ Currently, most AUSL training academies are not turnarounds, but the organization has begun training teachers in selected turnaround schools, thus blurring the distinction between “turnarounds” and “training academies.”

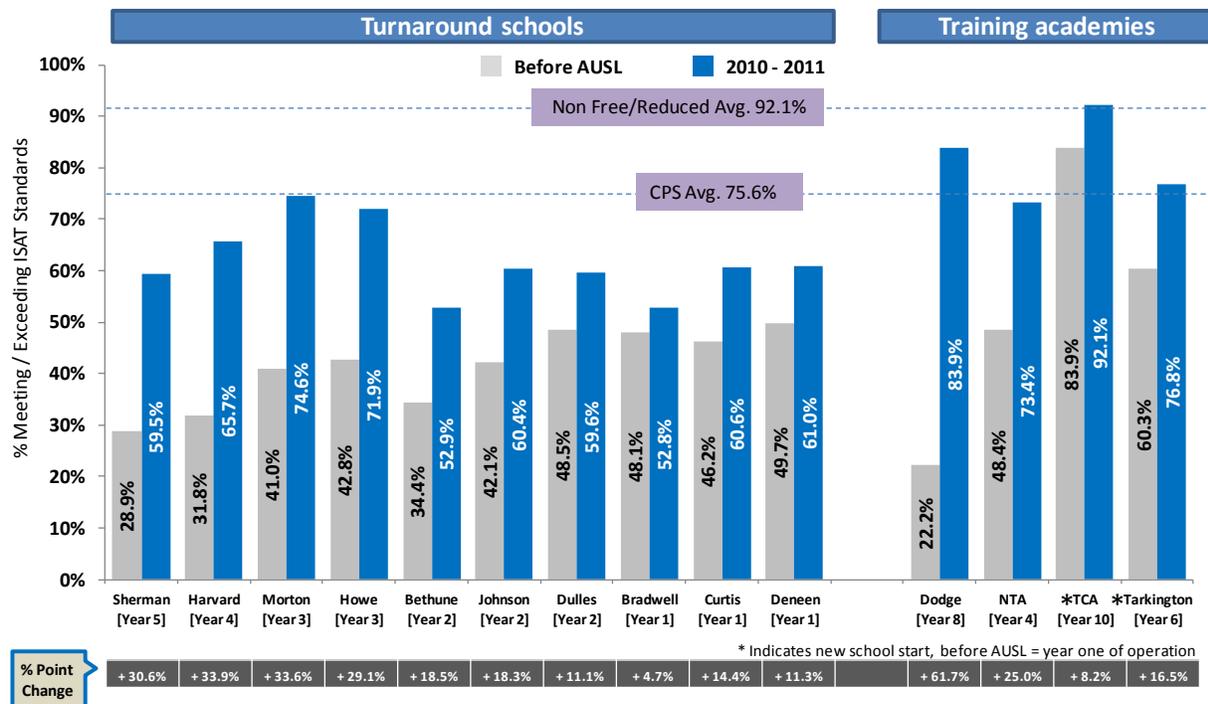
TURNAROUND PROGRAM RESULTS TO DATE

AUSL states three broad goals for its schools and the types of data used to measure progress against those goals:

Goal	As measured by
A stronger culture of learning	High attendance rates
Improved academic excellence	Nationally normed academic proficiency
Greater chances of future success	Competitive preparation for high school and college

Schools managed by AUSL show steady, positive improvements in achievement and attendance results. For example, a look at the percentage of students per school that are meeting or exceeding standards as measured by the Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT) composite shows significant percentage-point gains. Schools that have been managed by AUSL for a longer period tend to have higher jumps in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards. See the chart below for detailed data.

ISAT Composite: Meeting/Exceeding Standards (Comparison: Before AUSL to 2011)⁴



⁴ Source: Chicago Public Schools REA. Data exclude English Language Learner students.

SCHOOL DESIGN ELEMENTS

Whole-school transformation. At the core of AUSL’s approach is the belief that a school needs to be entirely changed—both staff and facilities—in order to create real turnaround. Therefore, when Chicago Public Schools selects a new school for turnaround and asks AUSL to manage that process, AUSL works with CPS to renovate the facility, appoint a new principal, and replace the full staff (with a portion of the teachers from the CTR program). Also, the new staff convenes in the summer for five weeks of planning and professional development for the upcoming year. Throughout this process of transforming the school, the students are not relocated; the same students leave school for the summer and return in the fall to a new school.

Displaced staff members are eligible to apply to the turnaround and to seek other positions in Chicago Public Schools. The percentage of staff that remains through the transition to AUSL management may be small. AUSL believes that turnaround requires a team of teachers who are “specially trained for the challenges of recreating an entire school culture and transforming an urban school from failure to success.”⁵ The entire staff must be completely invested in the turnaround mission for it to succeed.

Intensive community outreach. Community outreach is a key element of the whole-school transformation process, because AUSL wants to ensure that stakeholders are on board with the changes taking place at a school given to AUSL to manage. This is often a struggle; some community members do not understand the rationale of Chicago Public Schools in turning over a school to a partner organization that replaces staff. Therefore, AUSL makes a substantial effort to reach out to school communities. During the spring, after CPS announces that AUSL will be assuming management of a school, the new principal identifies and reaches out to community leaders. The principal then hosts a community forum at a neutral location (not the school) to solicit input concerning the school from interested stakeholders. AUSL attempts to implement suggestions that are feasible and fit with the model, such as extra-curricular sports. Prior to the start of school, the new staff reaches out to the community in the ways that they deem best. This often involves staff members hosting a picnic or barbeque, offering tours of the school, and visiting the homes of students. As the school year gets underway, most schools will have parent resource rooms as well as classroom volunteer opportunities, family engagement nights, and other activities to keep the community involved.

The school leads most of this community outreach work, but the school staff does receive some support from AUSL home office staff. Additionally, AUSL has hired a full-time Manager of Community Engagement to help strengthen its community outreach work.

Defined phases of support with performance benchmarks. AUSL manages schools for the long term. For elementary schools, AUSL has identified three phases of support: Turnaround, Continued Improvement, and Sustained Change,⁶ taking place over eight years. For each phase, AUSL works with its schools to meet specific performance benchmarks, as outlined below. (AUSL is currently developing a parallel model for high schools.)

⁵ From AUSL website (www.ausl-chicago.org)

⁶ These three phases are specific to the elementary schools managed by AUSL.

Phase	Years	Performance Benchmarks
Turnaround	1-2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close attendance gap by 50% • Close achievement gap by 33%
Continued Improvement	3-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close initial attendance gap by 75% • Close initial achievement gap by 66%
Sustained Change	6-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close remaining attendance gap by 100% • Close remaining achievement gap by 100%

Codified but flexible school model. Incorporating research and input from other school improvement-related organizations,⁷ AUSL has evolved a model called PASSAGE to summarize the characteristics of its school transformation process (see graphic below for details). Principals and new staff learn about this model and use it to guide their planning. However, the model also allows for some flexibility in how key elements are implemented.

Key Elements	
P ositive School Culture →	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Safe and orderly school and classroom environment 2 Effective recruitment, attendance and discipline policies
A ction Against Adversity →	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Engaged parents and community partners 2 Proactive social supports that meet student needs
S etting Goals and Getting it Done →	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Aggressive, transparent goals for schools, teams, and individuals 2 Performance management systems with cycles of inquiry
S hared Responsibility for A chievement →	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Strong leadership with high-functioning teams 2 Relentless efforts to recruit, retain, and motivate high-quality staff
G uaranteed and Viable Curriculum →	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Standards-based, college prep K-12 curriculum 2 Aligned assessment system that identifies student academic needs
E ngaging and Personalized Instruction →	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Focused professional development that ensures teacher effectiveness 2 Deliberate use of Danielson framework and signature strategies

Schools are provided with tools and supports for implementing these elements of PASSAGE. For example, in regards to “Positive School Culture,” AUSL provides School Environment and Classroom Environment checklists that set a common standard of expectation across schools.

However, there are some variations across AUSL schools outside of elements required under the PASSAGE model. As AUSL explains: “Examples of variations you might see from one school to another are different

⁷ Marzano, Bridgespan, MASS Insight

types of reward programs for students based on positive behavior, or different types of arts or fitness programs based on partnerships with specific organizations and entities in the city.”⁸

Urban teacher training. The Chicago Teacher Residency program is core to AUSL’s model. It provides a pipeline of teachers who are trained in the specifics of AUSL’s approach and provides the foundation for creating cohesive teacher teams in turnaround schools. AUSL determines the size of the CTR program each year through projected staffing needs in its schools for the following year. The organization then solicits applications using a rigorous selection process. Recent acceptance rates have been around 10 percent.⁹

During their one year of training in the CTR program, residents are paid an annual stipend of \$30,000 plus financial aid, and divide their time for a full year between clinical practice in a classroom and master’s degree course work. The clinical practice occurs at one of AUSL’s training academies, which are schools within the AUSL network that have a concentration of experienced teachers. There, residents work four days per week in the classroom of a seasoned teacher, who acts as a mentor (and who earns a 20 percent pay premium for the role of supervising one to two residents). Residents complete course work (one day per week and an initial summer program) via a partnership with National Louis University, which works with AUSL to align content with field work. Ultimately, graduates receive a master’s degree and teaching certification from National Louis University. About 80 percent of those who enroll successfully complete the rigorous program.

In regards to job placement, residents sign a contract to serve in a high-needs CPS school for four years after graduation. AUSL believes that this placement approach assists with recruitment and retention by attracting applicants specifically interested in teaching in high-needs schools who are willing to make a multi-year commitment. AUSL hopes that all residents will attain placement in AUSL schools, but hiring decisions reside with principals, and there are typically a few residents per class who do not gain a teaching position at an AUSL school (but are instead placed in a non-AUSL-managed school within CPS). Overall, 90 percent of graduates are employed as CPS teachers following graduation. Graduates from the CTR program are employed under the same terms and compensation structure as other CPS teachers.

The result of this training program is that many of the teachers in AUSL schools share consistent expectations and a common language, are familiar with AUSL processes, and already know each other, which fosters the development of professional learning communities.

Intensive and tailored coaching. Coaching is a critical component of the AUSL model, and the organization has multiple coach roles. Turnaround Coaches focus on the early-stage turnaround schools and typically serve a portfolio of two to four schools. They support both new teachers (AUSL residency graduates who are in their first or second year as teachers of record) as well as teachers who may not be new to the profession but are new to the AUSL network. School-Based Coaches are typically placed at later-stage turnaround schools and often serve just one school (instead of a portfolio of multiple schools). They focus on literacy and numeracy.

Mentor-Resident Coaches are housed at training academies and work with mentors and their residents to ensure that residents are receiving appropriate mentorship and sufficient feedback to develop their skills.

⁸ From email exchange with Jennifer Husbands and Jarvis Sanford of AUSL, September 2011.

⁹ Over 800 applications were received for 73 starting elementary and high school residents in the Class of 2010.

AUSL schools are also served by Content Coordinators, who provide support to teachers and principals in their specific content area.

Social and emotional supports. AUSL schools take a multi-pronged approach to providing social and emotional supports to students. AUSL trains its teachers to be “no-nonsense nurturers” who set and reinforce clear expectations, but also create a classroom environment that is caring and supportive. Also, each school has a case manager and typically a full-time social worker to address student needs. Furthermore, AUSL repurposes many of the security positions in schools into “Educational Support Personnel” (ESPs), who are trained in AUSL management strategies so that their approach to interacting with students is consistent with what students experience in the classroom. The ESPs help monitor common areas (e.g., lunchroom, hallways) and intervene if a situation calls for support. AUSL has a partnership with City Year to provide teams to many turnaround schools; these teams focus on attendance and behavior issues and academic support. Some AUSL schools form additional partnerships with organizations to provide social and emotional supports such as counseling, anger management, health and wellness, and family and life-skills programming.

Personalized instruction. AUSL teachers are trained in “Signature Strategies,” which are a combination of management and instructional strategies.¹⁰ The instructional strategies, like Think-Pair-Share, Socratic Questioning, and Chunk-Chew-Check for Understanding lead to heightened student engagement. AUSL schools use a comprehensive assessment system and ongoing analysis of student performance to identify topics that need to be re-taught and students who need to receive this re-teaching. Diagnostic data are used to create small groups of students for specific interventions, particularly in math and literacy.

Performance management. AUSL devotes significant resources to performance management and monitoring. There are two Managing Directors who oversee turnaround schools—one for elementary schools and the other for high schools—and each is supported by a Director of Student Achievement. The principals of turnaround schools report to these two Managing Directors, who meet quarterly with principals to set goals for student achievement, review progress towards goals, and create plans for meeting goals. (Principals receive performance incentives if they meet school-wide improvement benchmarks set at the start of each school year.) Additionally, a Director of K-12 Assessment works across the organization to pull data from the Classroom Diagnostic Assessment System as well as other assessments (e.g., locally-developed interims, NWEA MAP) used by AUSL schools.

FUNDING

Much of the funding to operate AUSL schools comes from CPS; it is funding that would flow to the schools if CPS were still operating them. This base amount of \$11,536 per pupil (in 2009-10)¹¹ covers the basic costs of running a school: staff, facilities, equipment, and so forth. AUSL supplements the base CPS funding with additional funding (\$823 per pupil in 2009-10¹²) from a combination of federal and state grants, foundations, and individual donors. In 2009, AUSL (along with its partner applicants of National Louis University and CPS) was awarded a Teacher Quality Partnership grant from the U.S. Department of Education for \$16.6

¹⁰ Several Signature Strategies draw on the work of Doug Lemov from Uncommon Schools and Wendy Chalk and Steve Ramirez from Life Long Learning & Associates.

¹¹ From Chicago Public Schools: http://www.cps.edu/about_cps/at-a-glance/pages/stats_and_facts.aspx

¹² From AUSL

million over five years, and AUSL is using much of it to scale up its teacher residency program. Several foundations have also funded AUSL in excess of \$1 million, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has given them over \$10 million.¹³ These additional funds—beyond those provided by CPS—mainly cover human capital costs for coaches, tutors, and mentor teachers, as well as curricular enhancements for AUSL schools.

SOURCES

This case study draws upon exchanges with personnel at AUSL as well as from a number of online sources and publications:

AUSL website: www.ausl-chicago.org

AUSL proposal to become an Illinois Partnership Zone Supporting Partner (2010). Retrieved online: http://www.isbe.state.il.us/apl/pdf/ipz/proposals/ausl_support.pdf

The School Turnaround Group and Mass Insight Education and Research Institute (March 2010). “The Lead Partner: A New Partnership Model.” Retrieved online: http://www.massinsight.org/publications/stg-resources/108/file/1/pubs/2010/07/09/STG_Lead_Partner_master_deck_March_2010.pdf

Information provided by AUSL employees (September-October 2011): Jarvis Sanford, Jim Blomberg, Jennifer Husbands

¹³ AUSL lists donors/funders on its website at <http://www.ausl-chicago.org/support-donors.html>. Donors listed who have given \$1-4 million are The Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, NewSchools Venture Fund, Chicago Community Trust, Boeing Charitable Trust, Mr. and Mrs. Michael Keiser, Pritzker Foundation and Pritzker Traubert Family Foundation.