



# Special Education in the Turnaround Context: UP Education Network Schools in Massachusetts

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UP Education Network (UP) is a school management organization that has been leading school turnaround efforts in Massachusetts since 2010. Its approach to improving services for students with disabilities in two local districts — Lawrence Public Schools (LPS) and Boston Public Schools (BPS) — demonstrates how intentional efforts to improve special education can contribute to broader school turnaround initiatives. This brief introduces the state of Massachusetts’s overall framework for school turnaround and details UP’s special education strategy as it has been applied in two schools that were restarted under the framework. The exploratory mini-cases presented in this brief were developed to illustrate how broader school transformation initiatives can integrate and, in turn, be supported by an intentional effort to improve programs and outcomes for students with a range of disabilities.

## Massachusetts Legislative Framework for “Restart” Schools

In 2010, Massachusetts adopted legislation enabling its state education agency, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE), to successfully apply for a \$250 million federal Race to the Top (RTTT) grant, to be used, in part, to support intensive school turnaround efforts (Act Relative to the Achievement Gap Process for “Underperforming” Schools, 2010).

That legislation, commonly referred to as “Chapter 12” for its location in the 2010 legislative session law, created a system in which MA DESE

categorizes districts and schools at one of five levels, based on their performance results on statewide assessments. Each level reflects the degree of intervention warranted, with level 1 denoting the highest-performing districts and schools, with the lowest level of need for support, and level 5 denoting those districts and schools that require the most extreme intervention due to persistently low performance.<sup>1</sup> In line with

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<sup>1</sup> Level-1 districts and schools are granted autonomy and flexibility and limited support. Level-2 districts and schools are granted some autonomy but are required to assess their progress and ensure that they are meeting the needs of all students. Level-3 districts and schools are provided assistance from the state, must conduct an annual needs assessment, and must report on progress stemming

## Methodology

These exploratory UP mini-cases illustrate strategies that one charter school management organization has implemented, in the course of its broader school turnaround efforts at individual schools, to improve special education and related services for students with disabilities. UP and its school-specific efforts highlighted in this brief were chosen as the subject of these mini-cases on the basis of the following criteria:

- ◇ The organization had embarked on an explicit turnaround effort and was able to show evidence of positive growth for all students;
- ◇ The school enrolled a significant population (i.e., 15 percent or more) of students with disabilities; and
- ◇ The organization’s staff had implemented an intentional plan to examine and improve special education and related services for students with disabilities.

The authors sought nominations from key state-level stakeholders engaged in school turnaround efforts across the country. After identifying a sample of schools that met their criteria, the authors collected additional data from public sources (e.g., state and district websites, newspapers), sought assistance from a school liaison to conduct the exploratory mini-cases, and conducted telephone interviews with key stakeholders leading and implementing the turnaround efforts. Each interview was completed by telephone and was approximately 60 minutes in duration. The authors interviewed nine individuals from UP: five from UP Academy Leonard, three from UP Academy Dorchester, and one from UP’s central office. Those interviewed from UP Academy Leonard were the principal, two special education teachers, the school psychologist, and the chairperson of the school’s individualized education program (IEP) committee. Those interviewed from UP Academy Dorchester were the principal, the director of student support, and a special education teacher. In addition, the authors interviewed the director of special education and psychological services for UP. For specific follow-up questions, the authors sought input from UP’s director of special education and psychological services and its chief executive officer.

the parameters outlined in RTTT and the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) regulations, the MA DESE has identified and defined multiple intervention models (e.g., restart, turnaround, and transformation) that districts can implement to dramatically improve any school categorized as being at level 4 or level 5. Although the state requires low-performing districts to initiate dramatic change for their schools, it gives them discretion in determining the specific approach. Among the specified options, “school restart” entails closing a low-performing school, then reopening it under new management that is given significant operational autonomy.<sup>2</sup> A restarted school can operate as either a district school run by an external management organization or an autonomous charter school. Under state law, students who are enrolled in school prior to a restart effort are guaranteed enrollment in the restarted school. In contrast, staff members who are employed in schools identified for restart are invited to reapply for their positions in the restarted school but are not guaranteed employment at the restarted school.

In line with the requirements outlined in Chapter 12, both LPS and BPS subsequently initiated restart efforts to turn around their lowest-performing schools. In 2011, LPS solicited proposals from outside management organizations to restart James Leonard Middle School. In 2013, BPS sought proposals to restart John Marshall Elementary School in Dorchester as a within-district Horace Mann charter school.<sup>3</sup> Both

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from interventions. Level-4 districts and schools are mandated to adopt specific improvement efforts and are assigned a liaison from the state, and their progress is closely monitored. Level-5 districts and schools are required to be placed under state receivership and are assigned a receiver to oversee their turnaround efforts (Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, n.d.a).

<sup>2</sup> For more details about the restart process under SIG, see Corbett, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Massachusetts charter-school law designates two types of charter school: “Commonwealth,” which are authorized by the state and operate as autonomous districts, and “Horace Mann,” which are authorized by and operate as part of a local district. For more information on Massachusetts’s two types of charter school, see MA DESE, 2015a.

districts sought to partner with a nonprofit school management organization to rapidly transform their most struggling schools, and each selected the charter management organization UP to lead its restart efforts. Because of the tools available to the respective districts, each district used a different governance mechanism to give UP the authority and school-level autonomies necessary to make change. Thus, the two approaches were a reflection of the districts' and schools' statuses. This brief describes UP's approach to the restart effort — in particular, the specific steps that it implemented to dramatically improve special education and related services (e.g., occupational therapy, speech therapy, or transportation) for students with disabilities in the two schools.

## UP's Evolution

In 2010, Scott Given launched the nonprofit UP Education Network, now known as the UP Education Network (UP). Prior to then, he had been the principal of an East Boston charter school, an experience that shaped his interest in developing an entity to “rapidly transform chronically underperforming district schools” (UP, n.d.a, paragraph 2). UP operates traditional district schools as well as stand-alone charter schools within school districts. In all instances, the network implements strategic and systemic changes to the school's education program and its organization, in order to improve student achievement. Massachusetts's Chapter 12 legislation, coupled with financial support from the state's RTTT grant and SIG, has enabled UP to restart some of the state's lowest-performing schools.

When UP entered the turnaround market, only a few charter-school operators were focused on school restarts. In general, charter-school operators have preferred to start new schools rather than taking over failing schools (Corbett, 2015). However, Given was committed to turning around failing schools and felt confident that he could apply the UP model, which had already led to success for the network's charter schools, to drive rapid student achievement gains in the restart context. UP launched its first restart effort in 2011, when it took over Boston's Patrick Gavin Middle

School, operating it as an in-district charter school. Over the next five years, UP was able to take the school, subsequently renamed UP Academy Charter School Boston, from a level-5 school to a level-1 school (MA DESE, 2011; MA DESE, 2015b).

In partnership with LPS and BPS and the state, UP leveraged distinct Massachusetts school turnaround governance models that enable an outside management company to oversee a school and make significant changes for the explicit purpose of driving rapid improvement. In LPS, a level-5 school district, the district contracted with UP to manage a level-4 school. In BPS, the district contracted with UP to convert a level-3 school to a Horace Mann in-district charter.

When UP initiates a restart, one of its priorities is to create a strong special education program that meets students' needs. This priority stems from UP's leadership having observed that students with disabilities are often among the most underserved students within their respective schools. At many schools, expectations for these students are extremely low, and the supports that are in place do not adequately match student needs. UP's approach is premised on the belief that improving special education is critical to improving the overall school.

## UP Academy in Lawrence: Restarting to Close the Achievement Gaps

The city of Lawrence is sometimes referred to as “the Ellis Island of Massachusetts” due to its diversity and its high number of first-generation immigrants. Although the community was largely made up of European immigrants in the early 1900s, most immigrants settling in Lawrence today are Hispanic. Hispanic students now make up the majority of the 13,000 students served by LPS.

In November 2011, Massachusetts placed the entire LPS district at level 5 due to widespread low performance among its schools (Massachusetts Executive Office of Education,

n.d.b). Placing an entire district at level 5 was unprecedented, and, as authorized under the legal framework outlined in Chapter 12, that designation led to the district being placed under state receivership (MA DESE, 2012a). The state took immediate action. In January 2012, the state commissioner of education appointed Jeffrey Riley — formerly the Chief Innovation Officer for BPS — to serve as the state receiver responsible for overseeing the district. Riley was charged with quickly implementing changes that would dramatically increase student achievement and close the achievement gaps evident in the district. In May of that year, in collaboration with the state commissioner of education, he released the district’s turnaround plan, which established a path for UP to enter the district’s turnaround space (LPS, 2015).

### **UP Assumes Management of James Leonard Middle School**

LPS’s turnaround plan outlined a strategy to transform the district’s lowest-performing schools by simultaneously replacing school leaders and key personnel in some schools and by working with proven providers to restart other schools. The state has a formal process through which providers can qualify as “priority partners” for turning around schools (MA DESE, 2014). Once the state has vetted providers as partners through the state review process, receivers such as Riley are authorized to select them to turn around poorly performing schools. Based on UP’s prior successes in Boston schools, Riley selected UP to take over James Leonard Middle School, which was subsequently renamed UP Academy Leonard.

Under its contract with the district, UP was charged with taking responsibility for the school’s daily operations, but the school would remain a part of LPS. UP and the district negotiated a contract for a gradual restart process that involved UP assuming leadership in the first year — that is, in 2012/13 — only for grade 6, and, in year two, expanding its responsibilities to include grades 7 and 8. Under the gradual restart plan, during the first year of UP Academy Leonard, in 2012/13, students in these two higher grades remained at the school and LPS continued to operate those grades. All students who were

enrolled at James Leonard Middle School prior to the restart (i.e., those who had been in grades 6 or 7 prior to the restart) were guaranteed enrollment in the school.

UP had developed specific school interventions to maximize the success of a school’s restart. As a relatively young school management organization, UP is still working to understand what processes and interventions might benefit from standardization across all of its schools. At the UP management level, personnel encourage as much sharing of best practices as possible among UP schools.

Each school going through the restart process receives the same amount of district funding before and after its restart. UP does not put substantial philanthropic dollars into a school once it has been restarted because the organization believes that schools should operate on public funds. However, UP Academy Leonard did receive approximately \$750,000 of additional funds from the state’s RTTT grant (LPS, n.d.) and from Massachusetts School Redesign Grants (Massachusetts’s implementation of its federal SIG) to use in the restart process (Superville, 2015).

UP Academy Leonard is unique among UP schools in that it benefits both from UP support and, because of its operational agreement with LPS, from district support. Although the school operated somewhat autonomously, it continued to receive the same funding and the same facilities and central-office infrastructure supports as it had prior to restart and as would any other LPS school. For example, the district provided transportation and back-office systems at UP Academy Leonard as it did for all other district schools. All of these services were provided at the UP Academy Leonard site, but were delivered with financial and staff support from LPS.

All employees who were at the school prior to the restart, including its teachers, had the opportunity to apply to work at the restarted school, or they could choose to transfer to other schools within the district. Teachers who ended up working at the restart would remain employees of LPS and, thus, would be members of the district’s collective bargaining agreement. The only change

for teachers who joined UP Academy Leonard was the addition of a rider to their collective bargaining agreement, specifying that they would have longer workdays and an extended school year. Of the 50 staff members employed at the school before its restart, only 2 applied to work at UP Academy Leonard.

The student population of the school at the restart mirrored the general demographics of the district. In 2011/12, before the restart, 314 students were enrolled across the three grades, with 20 percent identified as students with disabilities and 98 percent identified as low income (MA DESE, n.d.). The community had perceived James Leonard Middle School to be a dangerous school: Common spaces such as hallways did not feel safe for students or staff, and the physical site was in disrepair, with 60 windows punched out or broken at one point (K. Bhasin, personal communication, April 28, 2015). As the UP Academy Leonard leadership team prepared to initiate the restart, they realized that they needed to restore a positive school culture at the school and restore the school's reputation with the broader community. These steps would be critical to successfully turning the school around.

### *Hiring the Right Leader*

Finding the right leader was the key first step to restarting James Leonard Middle School. To lead the restart, UP selected Komal Bhasin, who was in the process of completing UP's leadership residency program in Boston. As the new principal, she was responsible for creating the school's education leadership team (which, in year two, would grow to include, in addition to the principal, the director of operations, the dean of students, and two deans of curriculum and instruction); hiring teachers; developing a rigorous academic program; and establishing a positive school culture that would be conducive to student learning.

The skills Bhasin developed as a leadership resident at UP in Boston and through prior UP training prepared her for the multiple challenges involved with restarting a failing school. As a resident, she had been introduced to the UP model, which provided her with a clear vision of how to initiate a successful restart. First, recognizing the discord generated within the neighborhood by the school

being identified as failing and in need of restart, Bhasin sought to build a strong sense of community and a positive school culture. As part of that effort, she also sought to raise expectations and hold students to high academic and behavioral standards. Implementing a strong curriculum and effective instructional practices was central to the turnaround effort. To support these broad goals, and in alignment with the model that UP had developed in prior restart efforts, Bhasin introduced an extended school day and school year; classrooms that were focused on core academic content; rigorous homework every night; academic supports for struggling students either before or after school and/or on weekends; school uniforms; and a consistent and fair disciplinary system.

### *Improving the Special Education Program*

Because UP Academy Leonard was in a level-5 school district, the state articulated specific areas for improvement in the formal corrective action plan for the school, including transforming its special education program. Initially, UP had planned to serve all students with disabilities in inclusive settings, in accordance with its commitment to serving all students in the least restrictive environment. However, after reviewing the individualized education programs (IEPs) of all the school's students with disabilities, Bhasin and the rest of her leadership team recognized that general education classrooms were not appropriate environments for all of their special education students. Recognizing that UP Academy Leonard would need to provide a broader continuum of placement options for students with disabilities, the school leadership team reviewed all aspects of the school's special education services to ensure that appropriate services were provided, and delivered in an appropriate setting, for all students with disabilities.

Based on that review, they also realized that, for some students, there was a disconnect between what was written in their IEP and the special education and related services that they had been receiving prior to the school's restart. The school leadership team realized that it would need to adjust how it allotted its special education resources in order to provide the services

outlined in students' respective IEPs. For instance, Bhasin needed to hire additional staff members to support students who had intellectual impairments (the term Massachusetts uses for students who have intellectual disabilities). She also recognized the need to provide support to general education teachers to ensure that they were equipped to differentiate both the curriculum and their methods of instruction for diverse learners.

Prior to James Leonard Middle School's restart, the district educational team facilitator (ETF) oversaw the special education program at the school and was responsible for overseeing implementation of all IEPs both there and in one other district school. Bhasin determined that if UP Academy Leonard's special education program were to operate effectively, her special education team needed more support than the district ETF was able to provide. At the network level, UP staff lobbied the district for permission to hire its own ETF who would be responsible for assisting UP Academy Leonard in providing quality special education services and supports. LPS granted the request, and Bhasin hired Emily Salander, a former special education teacher who was then employed at UP Academy Leonard as an English language arts (ELA) teacher, to be the school's dedicated ETF. Onsite at UP Academy Leonard every day, Salander was responsible for, among other things, monitoring the provision of services to ensure compliance with IEPs, providing special education-related supports to the administration and teachers, and conducting annual programmatic reviews. Her daily presence at school enabled her to be a general resource for teachers and/or administrators on issues such as legal compliance, as well as to serve as an instructional leader, available to coach special education teachers and paraprofessionals. School staff reported that having a full-time ETF focused solely on UP Academy Leonard was essential to improving special education services for students and their families (K. Bhasin, personal communication, April 28, 2015).

During her first year as the ETF, Salander was in LPS's central office at least once a week to provide information or seek support. This was, in part, an intentional effort to build her relationship with

the LPS special education team. By visiting the office regularly, she was able to keep the district updated about upcoming needs at her school, raise questions in a timely manner, troubleshoot complex cases, and leverage resources available at the district's central-office level.

Salander's relationship with district staff paid off in multiple ways. For instance, in the first year of the restart, two UP Academy Leonard students struggled significantly. After their respective IEP teams had implemented a variety of supports and interventions for each student, each team determined that the particular student with whom it was working would be better served in a more restrictive therapeutic setting, which the district operated at a different site. Because UP was operating the school as part of the district, district staff would need to sign off on any decision to move students to a more restrictive setting in the district. The relationships Salander had built with those staff members made it easier to have those discussions and to engage them in the IEP team's decision-making process. The school and the district have continued to work closely together to make decisions for students who have complex needs, including sometimes making alternative placements.

### *Developing a More Inclusive Culture for Special Education Students*

Prior to when UP assumed leadership of James Leonard Middle School, special education had been seen by staff and families as distinct and separate from general education, led by its own faculty. UP Academy Leonard takes a different view, embracing the notions that special education is the responsibility of all teachers and staff at the school and that the success of students with disabilities is essential to the school's overall success.

In an effort to improve the quality of special education and related services, when the UP team took over, it sought to give special education students as much access as possible to the general education curriculum. To that end, all teachers were provided with professional learning about instructional differentiation and appropriate accommodations and modifications. School personnel are expected to continually find

ways to support the education of students with disabilities to be in general education classrooms to the maximum extent possible (K. Neilley, personal communication, April 29, 2015). This is in contrast to students with more significant disabilities being served in separate classrooms and having only limited interactions with their peers who do not have disabilities, as was the case pre-restart.

General education teachers are required to make their lesson plans available to special education teachers on a pre-determined schedule so that the special education teachers have adequate time to plan appropriate classroom accommodations and curricular modifications. In addition, the schedule has been modified to ensure that teachers — including general education and special education — have time together each week to co-plan lessons and to discuss the needs of specific students. General education and special education teachers also have regularly scheduled formal check-ins with one other, along with informal check-ins, to discuss student progress and behavior.

UP also introduced benchmark assessments, which provide teachers with timely data about student progress. Further, all teachers — both special education and general education — now have ready access to relevant information about their students with disabilities through a data dashboard, which also gives them the ability to review students' IEPs online.

School decisions are considered in light of how they will affect all students. For example, scheduling decisions are informed by an intent to maximize all students' learning time, and also to maximize collaboration among all staff members in order to inform decision-making about supports for specific students. As a result of this and other changes, the school has been able to integrate nearly all students with disabilities into inclusive classrooms, providing them with push-in and/or pull-out supports as outlined in their IEPs.

### ***Providing Staff with Much-Needed Special Education Professional Learning***

UP Academy Leonard's newly hired staff tended to be young and energetic, but relatively

inexperienced. At the beginning of the first year, many teachers struggled to implement the accommodations called for by students' IEPs. Salander was charged with planning and providing professional learning to both special education and general education staff. She designed targeted sessions focused on implementing appropriate accommodations and modifications and assisted staff in tracking interventions and monitoring student progress. School staff began using data dashboards to assess progress, and if the data showed that students were not making adequate progress, they made program changes. As a result of introducing a more disciplined, data-driven approach, teachers serving students with disabilities were working collaboratively to develop IEP goals for individual students, implement accommodations and modifications, and track progress.

### ***Hiring Specialists to Support Diverse Needs***

UP Academy Leonard hired a full-time school psychologist, Diana Rawson, whose sole role was to provide counseling and support services to students with disabilities. Having a full-time psychologist at one school was atypical for LPS, whose psychologists generally serve students with disabilities at multiple schools. The school's psychologist and ETF worked collaboratively to ensure that individual students' academic, social, and emotional needs were met. In addition, Rawson prioritized staying in regular communication with the teaching staff, to ensure she was informed about students' evolving needs.

Together, Rawson and the ETF oversaw the school's Response to Intervention (RTI) process, a multi-tiered approach to early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs. RTI entails focused interventions for students and careful monitoring of students' progress to assess the extent to which they respond to the interventions or require additional interventions (RTI Action Network, n.d.). UP Academy Leonard teachers were active participants in monitoring interventions and ensuring that students were offered focused and increasingly intense interventions before any formal referral would be made for special education services.

Table 1. UP Academy Leonard Demographics and Proficiency Levels

School Year	Total Enrollment	Percent Special Education Enrollment	Percent Free or Reduced-Price Meals	Percent School Proficiency ELA	Percent Special Education Proficiency ELA	Percent School Proficiency Math	Percent Special Education Proficiency Math
<b>Pre-Restart</b>							
2010/11	304	21.7	96.1	36	10	11	N/A <sup>a</sup>
2011/12	314	20.1	98.1	36	14	13	N/A <sup>a</sup>
2012/13 <sup>b</sup> (grades 7-8 only)	222	18.9	93.7	38	13	18	3
<b>Post-Restart</b>							
2012/13 <sup>c</sup> (grade 6 only)	117	23.9	100	37	17	56	9
2013/14 (grades 6-8)	356	19.1	96.6	54	22	36	10
2014/15 (grades 6-8)	331	18.1	N/A <sup>d</sup>	61	35	48	19

Notes.

<sup>a</sup> No students with disabilities took the math assessment in this year.

<sup>b</sup> In 2012/13, James Leonard Middle School served only grades 7 and 8.

<sup>c</sup> In 2012/13, UP Academy Leonard served only grade 6.

<sup>d</sup> In 2014/15, Massachusetts changed categorizations from free or reduced-price meals to “high needs” and “economically disadvantaged,” so there were no poverty data for this year that were equivalent to data from previous years.

Source. Data obtained from <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu>.

## Early Indicators of Success

The changes that UP instituted at James Leonard Middle School have borne fruit. By the end of the 2013/14 school year, the school had met all of its accountability targets for student growth, and the school moved from level-5 status to level-4 status (MA DESE, n.d.b). The autonomy that UP Academy Leonard enjoyed in relation to curriculum and staffing, coupled with support from LPS, underscores how districts and turnaround schools can work in tandem to raise achievement for all students. Students with disabilities do not have opportunities to “fall through the cracks” at UP Academy Leonard, where special education is not that different from general education. It is not a program that operates in isolation from general education classrooms. Rather, supports are in place for all students to ensure continual progress toward meeting their goals. UP Academy Leonard’s administration and teaching staff have

created a culture in which special education is woven into the school’s fabric.

Prior to its restart, James Leonard Middle School had struggled with achieving high rates of student proficiency, particularly in mathematics (see table 1). During the first year of the restart, the district continued to operate grades 7 and 8, and, during that time, the students in these grades continued to show similar patterns of low performance. In contrast, the students enrolled in grade 6 during UP Academy Leonard’s first academic year (i.e., 2012/13) showed a large amount of growth in overall mathematics proficiency. However, proficiency rates for students with disabilities at UP Academy Leonard were very low in comparison to the school’s overall proficiency rates, particularly in mathematics, and because 2012/13 was the first year disaggregated data were available for this subgroup in mathematics, it is unclear whether there was

improvement or not. At the end of the 2013/14 school year, during which UP Academy Leonard operated grades 6–8, the data for that year showed considerable improvement in ELA in the overall population, as well as among students with disabilities. The mathematics proficiency rates initially dropped but then rose the following year, 2014/15. Students with disabilities, as a subgroup, continued to show improvement in both ELA and math in the years following the restart, although they continued to have proficiency rates substantially lower than those of the broad school population. Overall, there has been a positive trajectory in students' academic performance for UP Academy Leonard following its restart as a charter school. While overall there was a dip in proficiency levels in the second year, this was due to the influx of new students. Based on UP's success with UP Academy Leonard, in 2013, LPS hired UP to restart Henry K. Oliver Middle School, which became UP Academy Oliver, at which UP has replicated its approach to special education.

### **Key Takeaways from Focused Improvement of Special Education at UP Academy Leonard**

The evolution of UP Academy Leonard has yielded several key takeaways about focusing on improvement of special education in restart schools.

- ◆ Conduct a focused review of all IEPs to assess student needs and to develop an appropriate staffing model based on those needs.
- ◆ Ensure appropriate staffing levels, both at the administrative/oversight level and at the instructional level.
- ◆ Commit to serving students with disabilities in inclusive settings to the greatest extent possible, so as to maximize their access to the general education curriculum, while also providing pull-out and push-in supports when appropriate.
- ◆ Develop an inclusive culture that fosters data-driven communication among general and special education teachers and staff.

- ◆ Create and use a data-tracking system to make informed and immediate changes to a student's academic program if needed.
- ◆ Provide focused professional learning, for both general and special education teachers, that supports a school culture of inclusion through provision of appropriate accommodations and modifications.
- ◆ Implement a robust RTI program that ensures provision of quality interventions and tracks results.
- ◆ Build collaborative relationships with the district, with a focus on delivering high-quality special education services.

## **UP in Boston: Chartering a Separate Path**

In 2013, UP continued its restart journey, expanding its portfolio to include an additional school restart in BPS. BPS's John Marshall Elementary School (Marshall) had been designated as a level-3 "persistently failing school" due to its performance on state assessments, which placed the K-5 school in the bottom 20 percent of all Massachusetts schools (MA DESE, 2012b). While not required to follow one of the turnaround models outlined under the federal School Improvement Grant, BPS wanted to prevent Marshall from becoming a level-4 school, so it proactively brought in UP to improve the school before its level dropped any further. UP converted it into a Horace Mann in-district charter school to ensure that the network would have the flexibilities necessary to make substantive changes and improvements to the school.

Marshall's enrollment for 2013/14 was approximately 560 students, with English learner students accounting for 22 percent of that enrollment and more than three quarters of all students qualifying for free or reduced-price meals. Marshall served as a special education hub for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities from across the district, and students with disabilities made up 16 percent of

its enrollment. A small portion of the students with disabilities were served in inclusive classrooms, but most had been diagnosed with more significant disabilities and were placed in one of five separate Learning Adaptive Behavior (LAB) classrooms, as designated by their IEPs. These students, most of whom were identified as having moderate to severe emotional or behavioral disabilities, spent less than 40 percent of their day in general education classrooms (J. Miller, personal communication, June 8, 2015).

## **UP Assumes Management of Marshall**

In spring 2013, BPS contracted with UP to restart Marshall in the following fall as a Horace Mann charter school. Under UP's management, Marshall was renamed UP Academy Charter School of Dorchester (UP Academy Dorchester). The first step in converting to charter status was for UP Academy Dorchester to apply to the state for approval, and then to the BPS school committee for final approval. As a Horace Mann charter school, UP Academy Dorchester would be operated and managed by UP as an independent provider, but would remain a district school, with UP Academy Dorchester operating under BPS for compliance management and considered part of the larger district portfolio. However, UP Academy Dorchester would have the autonomy to make changes to the academic program without needing district approval. Former Marshall staff were allowed to apply for positions at UP Academy Dorchester, but only a few applied and were hired, and they were custodial or cafeteria staff. All other staff, including all teachers, for UP Academy Dorchester were new hires by UP.

For the first year, 2013/14, all students previously enrolled at Marshall were allowed to reenroll in the newly constituted charter school, although they had to submit an application. Eighty-five percent of families chose to reenroll their children in UP Academy Dorchester (L. Ewing, personal communication, May 8, 2015), which was a far higher percentage than the historical annual reenrollment rate at the school. Because UP Academy Dorchester is an in-district charter school, beginning in its second year it had to follow state law regarding the enrollment of

new students, who gain admission to the school through a district-wide lottery.

### *Hiring the Right Leader*

Lana Ewing was brought on as the new principal, charged with spearheading the launch of UP Academy Dorchester. Ewing had completed a leadership residency with UP, serving as a principal-in-residence at another UP school; in that role, she observed and learned the principles and practices that define the UP culture. This training prepared her to embark on a journey to transform Marshall, including its special education program.

### *Improving the Special Education Program*

In UP Academy Dorchester's first year, staff worked to implement all IEPs as written by previous staff. However, in many instances, they were not certain whether the students with disabilities had been receiving the IEP-designated accommodations and services, because Marshall did not have an accurate system for tracking special education or related services. After carefully reviewing all IEPs, newly hired Dean of Student Support Kimberly Lake realized that the majority of the IEPs were also out of compliance. Many were in varying stages of completion and implementation, while others did not reflect the services that were actually being provided to students. Updating and correcting the IEPs would be a huge, time-consuming task. Part of the challenge was that each student's special education records were not necessarily collected into one file and/or stored in a centralized location. For instance, specific aspects of students' records (e.g., IEP goals versus diagnosis) were stored in different rooms and by specialty (e.g., speech therapy versus resource room). Because the records for a single student could be in multiple files, stored in different places throughout the building, gaining a complete picture of individual students' diagnoses and goals could be challenging.

During that first year, special education staff met with families to address noncompliant IEPs. In some cases, meetings were short, focused simply on reviewing checklists or obtaining parent signatures. But many meetings were longer and more substantive, with staff and families discussing major changes to a student's identified placement

and specific services relative to the student's diagnosis. Although the number of staff hours dedicated to this task was not documented, Lake estimated that, on average, each IEP review required three meetings with families to bring the files into compliance (K. Lake, personal communication, May 20, 2015).

In addition to having her staff update IEPs and work with families to make them compliant, Lake created a tracking system to accurately monitor IEP implementation, including service provision. The new system contributed to an environment in which quality service delivery was of paramount importance, and it both encouraged and enabled staff to focus on students' progress in meeting their IEP goals.

### ***Learning Adaptive Behavior (LAB) Cluster Challenges***

UP assumed management of Marshall in June 2013, and the doors of UP Academy Dorchester opened in August. This timing gave UP little time to implement changes to Marshall's LAB cluster program, in which some students with disabilities were taught in separate classrooms, which themselves were clustered in a different part of the building from the general education classrooms. But staff quickly realized that the prior LAB cluster format did not meet the needs of students with disabilities. For instance, many of the students in the LAB classrooms had been in the same classrooms for years with the same peers and with little, if any, access to the general education curriculum or interaction with fellow students who did not have disabilities. Before the restart, UP staff had the opportunity to observe the LAB cluster classrooms. Principal Ewing describes those that she observed as "volatile and chaotic," with questionable classroom management and students frequently coming and going from classrooms (L. Ewing, personal communication, May 8, 2015). The LAB classrooms were also located in a separate wing of the school building. In theory, that separation was so that LAB classroom students could receive intensive supports, but the UP team observed limited learning and peer interaction within these classrooms. So, from the beginning, the UP special education administrative staff

made it a priority to raise the quality of support and instruction for students in LAB classrooms and to increase their inclusion to the maximum extent appropriate for each student.

To advance UP's goal of increasing the quality of programs and the degree of inclusion for students who had been and/or remained in the LAB classrooms, UP Academy Dorchester's administrative team — comprising the principal, the special education coordinator, and the dean — leaned heavily on UP's network-level staff to support the school's special education program. For example, four months into the school year, Lake realized that she did not have enough staff to adequately support students in the LAB classrooms. Consequently, she recommended hiring two additional teachers and a paraprofessional, to reduce class size in the LAB classrooms. In addition, UP's network-level Director of Special Education and Intervention, Casey Ngo-Miller, was actively engaged in supporting Lake's work as, in close collaboration with the full IEP team, Lake implemented dramatic changes. One of those changes was transitioning students from segregated settings to more inclusive instructional settings and ensuring that services outlined in IEPs were delivered with fidelity (C. Ngo-Miller, personal communication, May 26, 2015). Lake also provided guidance on complicated special education cases and got involved herself to troubleshoot in particularly challenging cases.

### ***Shifting the Culture to Inclusion***

After the first year of the restart, UP Academy Dorchester staff concluded that, despite their best efforts, the LAB cluster program continued to be largely dysfunctional and did not fully serve the social, emotional, or academic needs of students with disabilities. This led to a redoubled effort to ensure that there was a full continuum of special education services in the school in the second year.

In the summer before school year 2014/15, both the general education and special education staff completed professional learning to assist them to fully implement the inclusion model. The first step was to transform the culture of the special education program and, specifically, to build a more robust RTI model, with the intent of serving

more students in more-inclusive settings. In year two, Lake and her team introduced additional interventions and more progress monitoring to support general education students who were struggling. In addition, they worked to transition students from the five self-contained LAB classrooms to general education classrooms in which these students would receive targeted supports from a special education teacher. This transition required the purposeful support for students and their families, to ensure that they understood and bought into the changes. It also required hiring two additional special education teachers in the second year, to support the programmatic changes.

The end result of the reorganization was that over the course of the restarted school's second year, the school transitioned from having five LAB classrooms to having just one. The one remaining separate classroom is a small, supportive learning environment for students with autism who have more significant needs and, therefore, require a more restricted setting.

Under Lake's leadership, UP Academy Dorchester staff embraced the philosophy that inclusion was paramount to the success of students with disabilities and was pivotal to the school's broader success (L. Ewing, personal communication, May 8, 2015). Staff at the UP network office, which managed the screening process for new teachers, sought to recruit candidates who appeared to have an unequivocal belief that all students can learn and who would maintain a laserlike focus on supporting students to do so (C. Ngo-Miller, personal communication, May 26, 2015). The network intentionally recruited young, inexperienced candidates and provided intense professional learning support to help them develop both their mindset and the skill set needed to support inclusive practices.

### *Training in "The UP Way"*

In recognition of the need for staff development, the UP's network-level leadership team encourages school leaders at all UP academies to allocate ample time for teachers' professional learning. For example, all UP school-based instructional personnel return from summer vacation early in the month of August — before

students return — to focus on building a strong and unified culture among the adults in the school. During this time, colleagues engage in professional learning activities without distractions. The emphasis on professional learning continues throughout the school year, with all UP academies scheduling schoolwide professional learning for staff every Wednesday afternoon, and also scheduling so that special education and general education staff have common planning time. As UP hopes is true of all of its special education teachers at UP Academy Dorchester, first-year special education teacher Asha Jassani has an unwavering focus on improving not only the academic scores of her students, but also their chances to be successful in life. According to Jassani, in serving her students, she has profited from receiving consistent network support, such as help with troubleshooting how to meet the needs of particular students; regularly scheduled RTI meetings; and coaching and feedback opportunities, available to her from multiple individuals at the administrative level (A. Jassani, personal communication, May 24, 2015).

### *"The UP Way": Succeeding Together*

At the beginning of the second year, as school staff set about planning the shift to serving more students in inclusive settings, the principal and the special education team fostered the expectation that general education and special education staff would work closely in making decisions about how best to implement their vision of inclusion. General education teachers were involved in the IEP process, and, in collaboration with the special education team, they assisted in developing goals for students. Special education teachers were offered professional learning opportunities to prepare them to effectively assist general education teachers in supporting students with disabilities in general education classrooms. All teachers were expected to provide the appropriate accommodations in their classroom, and general and special education teachers jointly planned to ensure a seamless delivery of the curriculum. Together, all teachers monitored student performance, using the schoolwide data-tracking system. This system allowed teachers to access information about a student, such as his or her behavior, academic

Table 2. UP Academy Dorchester Demographics and Proficiency Levels

School Year	Total Enrollment	Percent Special Education Enrollment	Percent Free or Reduced-Price Meals	Percent School Proficiency ELA	Percent Special Education Proficiency ELA	Percent School Proficiency Math	Percent Special Education Proficiency Math
<b>Pre-Restart Baseline</b>							
2010/11	677	13.7	79.9	20	7	17	11
2011/12	716	14.7	77.8	10	4	12	N/A <sup>a</sup>
2012/13	688	15.6	78.3	14	7	13	7
<b>Post-Restart</b>							
2013/14 <sup>b</sup>	562	15.5	85.8	40	12	60	29
2014/15	625	17.4	N/A <sup>c</sup>	44	20	51	19

Notes.

<sup>a</sup> No students with disabilities took the math assessment in this year.

<sup>b</sup> In 2013/14, John Marshall Elementary School became UP Academy Dorchester.

<sup>c</sup> In 2014/15, Massachusetts changed categorizations from free or reduced-price meals to “high needs” and “economically disadvantaged,” so there are no poverty data for this year that were equivalent to data from previous years.

Source. Data obtained from <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu>.

performance, or history of completing homework assignments. Access to accurate, relevant, and current information allowed teachers to address important decisions collaboratively and in an informed and timely manner.

Having easy access to student data is just one way in which teachers feel supported in their own efforts to give students what they need in order to succeed. UP Academy Dorchester teacher Meghan Cronen sees this type of teacher support as being at the heart of the school’s approach to special education: give teachers what they need and they will be able to give students what the students need. For example, referring to the data-tracking system, Cronen reported that access to the data enables teachers to detect trends and, if needed, to come up with solutions for the problems indicated by the data (M. Cronen, personal communication, May 22, 2015). This ability to identify problems and implement immediate changes has helped to catalyze the school’s overall turnaround effort. For instance, managing its own budget allowed UP Academy Dorchester to identify gaps in its staffing model and to hire accordingly.

## Early Indicators of Success

Prior to turnaround, Marshall had struggled to improve students’ proficiency rates in both ELA and math. In 2012/13 — the last school year before its restart — the school had not met any of the accountability measures set by the state (MA DESE, n.d.a).

The changes that UP Academy Dorchester implemented in the two years following its launch generated notable success. The first year of the restart, 2013/14, yielded immediate and large growth in both subjects for the school overall, from 14 to 40 percent proficiency in ELA and from 13 to 60 percent proficiency in math (see table 2). For their part, students with disabilities gained 5 percentage points in ELA and 22 percentage points in math. ELA scores for all students continued on an upward trend in the second year after restart, but the school saw a drop in math scores, both schoolwide and for students with disabilities. More time is necessary to see whether scores in ELA can continue an upward trend and whether math scores will bounce back.

In 2014/15, UP Academy Dorchester's second year, the school met the state standard on six of seven composite performance index indicators.

At the time of this exploratory study, UP Academy Dorchester had not yet met its benchmark in special education, but there had been considerable growth in this area. This growth is exemplified by the fact that in 2012, students in the special education program at Marshall had scored a 34 on the Composite Performance Index (CPI) scale, while in 2014, the equivalent student population scored a 74, just one point shy of meeting the standard (MA DESE, n.d.a). In particular, it appears that the shift to serving more students with disabilities in more-inclusive settings was driving success at UP Academy Dorchester. According to Principal Ewing, the school also reduced the number of behavior referrals drastically in its second year. With supports, students who had been isolated were flourishing socially and academically.

Staff perceived that the collaborative environment fostered by the school's administrative team, and supported by the UP network, set the stage for sustainable change (C. Ngo-Miller, personal communication, May 26, 2015). The school could not have seen schoolwide academic growth without addressing the needs of students with disabilities. Reconfiguring the LAB classrooms and shifting more students into inclusive classrooms had a positive impact on the academic achievement of students with disabilities. With the school under UP management, all students now have access to a higher-quality general education academic program, as well as to more appropriate special education and related services. Furthermore, the collaborative model allowed staff to solve problems earlier and provided teachers with critical support at all stages within the instructional decision-making process.

Looking to the future, the UP network is expanding its enrollment at existing schools; UP Academy Dorchester will grow to serve kindergartners through grade 7 students in the 2015/16 school year. In the fall of 2016, UP will enter a new district and partner with the Springfield (MA) Public Schools and the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP) to restart one of the city's most struggling schools, as determined by the SEZP (UP, n.d.b). UP created the roadmap that its schools are following toward success. Communication,

collaboration, and solid systems allow teachers to concentrate on delivery of high-quality instruction.

## Key Takeaways from Focused Improvement of Special Education at UP Academy Dorchester

UP's work with UP Academy Dorchester has yielded some key takeaways for focused improvement of special education for in-district charter schools.

- ◆ Prioritize hiring strong school leadership who, in turn, will hire strong instructional personnel.
- ◆ Conduct a focused review of IEPs to assess student needs and develop an appropriate staffing model based on those needs.
- ◆ Leverage available autonomies to facilitate swift decision-making and catalyze turnaround.
- ◆ Recruit and hire dedicated, mission-driven individuals who are focused on achievement and who believe that all students can reach their potential.
- ◆ Provide high-quality professional learning support aimed at creating and sustaining a schoolwide commitment to inclusion.
- ◆ Examine levels of services and use data to track their delivery to improve the quality of special education and related services.
- ◆ Develop a culture of collaboration among general and special education personnel that facilitates provision of timely, high-quality services to students with disabilities.
- ◆ Reserve and protect time for general and special education professionals to meet to foster seamless supports for students.
- ◆ Examine segregated classroom settings to identify opportunities to provide students who have more significant disabilities with greater access to the general education curriculum and to peers without disabilities.
- ◆ Develop systems to ensure compliance with special education rules and regulations, which are the building blocks of an effective and sustainable restart effort.

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<http://centeronschoolturnaround.org>

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