

Mastery parent testimony re: SB6
Elizabeth Moffitt, grandmother of a Mastery student and a
proponent of turnaround schools, West Philadelphia

Greetings and thank you for allowing me here to give you a parent's perspective on turnaround schools and why I believe this is one of the more effective ways to help failing schools in Pennsylvania.

My name is Elizabeth Moffitt. My 15-year-old grandson attends Shoemaker High School, which is part of the Mastery Charter Schools network in Philadelphia. He has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which means he needs additional supports to help his learning. I am happy to say that he is doing very well at Shoemaker. His grades are high, his learning and growth is steady and he looks forward to attending school every day. But his experience with schools in Philadelphia was not always a happy one.

Prior to high school, my grandson attended Mann Elementary, a chronically failing public school in my West Philadelphia neighborhood. Mann Elementary became a Mastery turnaround school in 2010. Both Shoemaker and Mann, once in the bottom 10% by performance in the City of Philadelphia prior to Mastery, are now two of the highest performing public schools in Philadelphia. This year they scored a 79.5 and a 74.5 respectively on the state's SPP.

Initially, I was against the turnaround. I considered it yet another bandage on a gaping wound. But I was also tired of the bullying and violence that was an ever escalating part of education in Philadelphia. My daughter and I were desperate to get a quality education for my grandson and had already transferred him to another school before the turnaround.

What I found with the turnaround initiative was a model that worked effectively, efficiently and quickly produced tangible results. Within one year of the turnaround, the school culture at Mann changed for the better. It became a school that says all students can and will achieve. It became a school where students learned to respect their teachers and one another. Students who, a year earlier, were failing, became students who cared about completing assignments and doing well on tests. Students who weren't even thinking about college as a possibility were suddenly thinking about which college they wanted to attend. These were the same students who attended the school when it was failing. Parents, including myself,

who took their children out of the neighborhood seeking a better option for their children were suddenly bringing them back to Mann.

As an active member of the School Advisory Committee (SAC) at Mann, I have seen firsthand the phenomenal change in the school from the behavior of the students both inside and outside the school to significant academic gains.

I was so impressed with the turnaround that I became an advocate for turnaround schools and was often called upon by the Philadelphia School district to support other parents who were going through a turnaround at their schools.

Cleveland Elementary, Gratz High School and Clymer Elementary schools in North Philadelphia were three of the lowest performing and chronically violent district schools in the city. Parent groups at these three schools voted in favor of a turnaround partnership with Mastery.

Today, each of those schools is showing tremendous gains. Cleveland is now one of the top elementary schools in the city. Gratz High School, which at one time was on the state's most violent schools list, is now one of the most talked about turnaround stories in Philadelphia because of its success in reducing violence and getting kids back on track.

As an advocate for turnarounds, I can tell you that improving low-performing schools is not easy. It takes a turnaround provider that brings skilled teachers, a proven culture of learning and a track record of success. It also takes a provider who understands that quality education is about more than just asking for more money. It's about making better decisions on how those financial resources are spent. It also takes parents who are willing to roll up their sleeves and partner with schools to support learning at home. And it takes a school district that decides failure is not an option when it comes to the education of children. Through this turnaround initiative, the district has already improved the educational opportunities of not a few but thousands of children in Philadelphia.

Without a turnaround model of intervention, many failing neighborhood schools would simply maintain a culture of failure and students would continue to suffer, especially students and families in the poorest neighborhoods who don't have the resources to demand better schools. Turnaround schools offer a great chance for success and hope in neighborhoods where many families have stopped hoping for better.

You might wonder why this issue was important enough for me to come to Harrisburg to speak with you.

My grandson is now a freshman at Mastery's Shoemaker Campus. Since his entry into Mastery, he has excelled academically and socially. A young man who had difficulty writing and who never read a book for pleasure now enjoys both. A young man who rarely participated in class and was often left out of social or sports activities now participates in sports (Fencing), school and social activities and community service. A boy who had been bullied at his previous school now moves with ease among his classmates and staff.

Before his coming to Mastery, our family struggled to see my grandson's path to high school. He barely wanted to go to school. Now we are talking about what colleges he wants to attend. Now we can see a clear opportunity for him to go on to secondary education if he chooses.

For too long, parents, particularly parents in Philadelphia, have been struggling to get a quality education for their children. Failing schools continue to fail. Students from these schools are ill prepared to succeed in life and eventually become part of the statistics of unemployment, poverty and incarceration.

The continued positive results of turnaround schools from providers who know how to get the job done merits continuation and expansion. I know you often hear from parents who complain about what's not working. I wanted to make sure you heard from a parent who can tell you what is working. And turnaround schools work. Thank you for your time and continued support.

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