

## Rocky Mountain Heights

*Colorado school district finds path to improvement through UVA-PLE*

Aurora Public Schools Superintendent Rico Munn made Andre Wright his district's interim chief academic officer in March 2017.<sup>1</sup> Wright's task? Move APS schools in the state's "priority improvement" designation up the achievement ladder, at least to "improvement" schools. The goal was to ensure APS better lived out its mission statement—"Every Student Shapes a Successful Future"—and gave students with historically limited access to post-secondary jobs and education more opportunities.

If Wright couldn't nudge enough of the state ratings upward, the district faced intervention, which could have meant school mergers or closures, not to mention worsening student outcomes and racial achievement gaps. Multiple APS schools were stuck with the priority improvement designation when Wright took the chief academic officer job. Turning them around would be no easy task.

But to find the way forward, Wright needed look no further than his own district. In the 2015-2016 school year, APS's Northeast zone, also known as Community P, contained five schools with the dreaded priority improvement label. It was after that year the district first engaged University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education to help turn things around.

PLE was one of several transformation strategies APS undertook after the 2015 to 2016 academic year. But through its success in Community P, where Wright was at the time the learning community director, the partnership proved to be the most effective initiative the district employed.

According to Wright, administrators had until then taken a scattershot approach to their school transformations, throwing many strategies "against the wall to see what would stick" in each of the district's communities.

Having seen firsthand the effects of UVA-PLE in the Northeast community, Wright made the decision as district CAO to expand the strategy district-wide. "Each learning community in the system was focused on a different turnaround or improvement strategy," Wright said. "I think they were in need of the very things that UVA offered. The 90-day work, focusing on the infrastructure, the key levers—for me, it just offered a lot of the solutions that I figured we needed."<sup>2</sup>

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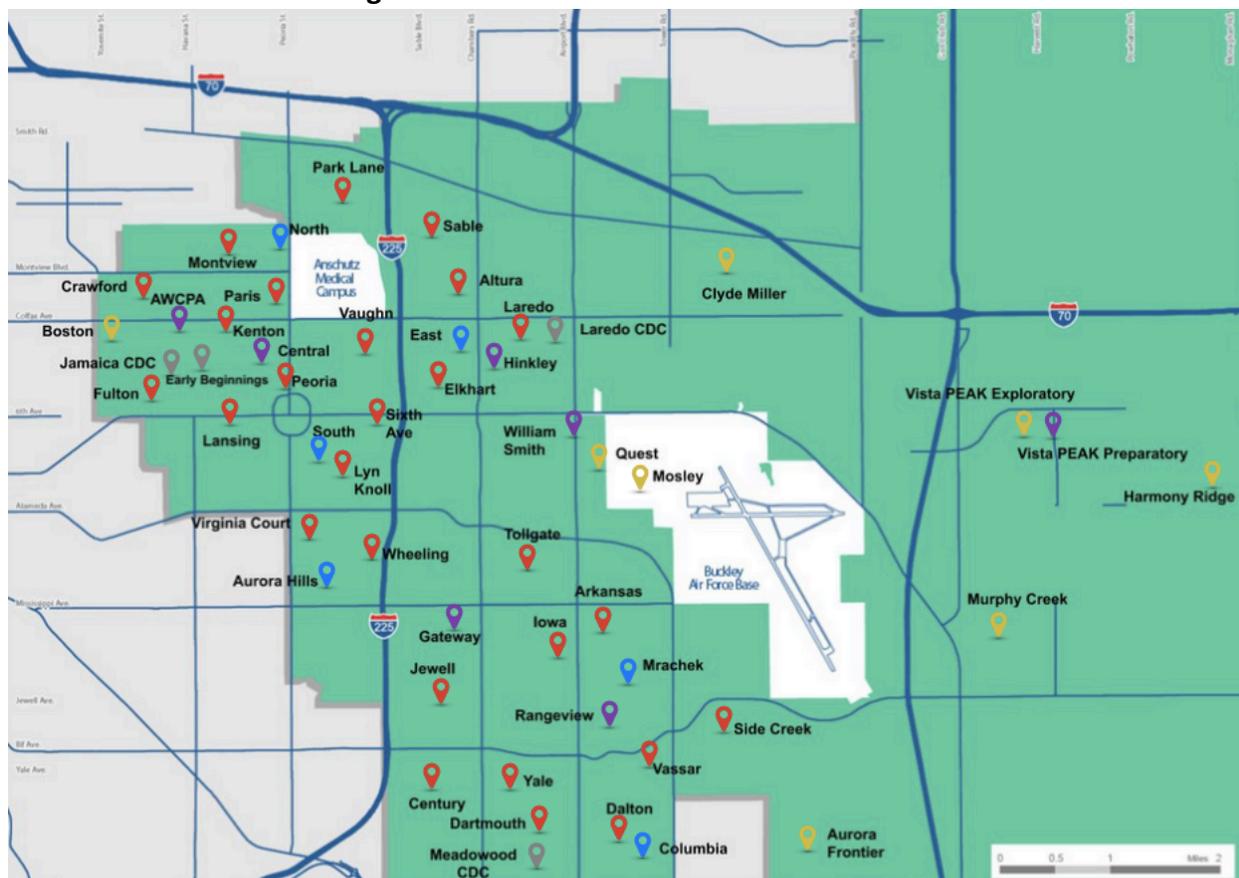
<sup>1</sup> Robles, Yesenia. "Meet Aurora's new chief academic officer, whose plans include more training for principals." *Chalkbeat*, 30 March 2018, [co.chalkbeat.org/2018/3/30/21104654/meet-aurora-s-new-chief-academic-officer-whose-plans-include-more-training-for-principals](https://co.chalkbeat.org/2018/3/30/21104654/meet-aurora-s-new-chief-academic-officer-whose-plans-include-more-training-for-principals). Accessed 10 March 2021. Note: Wright moved into the permanent CAO role in March 2018.

<sup>2</sup> All information attributed to Andre Wright is taken from interviews conducted by the case writer on 5 March 2020 and 4 Dec. 2020.

## Understanding APS

The Adams-Arapahoe 28J School District, commonly referred to as APS, is a diverse group of schools situated just east of Denver, Colorado (Fig. 1). Spanning several municipalities in the Denver metropolitan area, APS serves more than 40,000 students from over 130 countries who speak at least 160 different languages.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1. The Aurora Public Schools District**



Source: [aurorak12.org/schools/interactive-map/](https://aurorak12.org/schools/interactive-map/)

The district is divided into four learning communities—Northeast, Central, South, and Northwest—and one Action Zone.<sup>4</sup> A learning community director leads each of the communities, all of which include schools from preschool through post-secondary education.

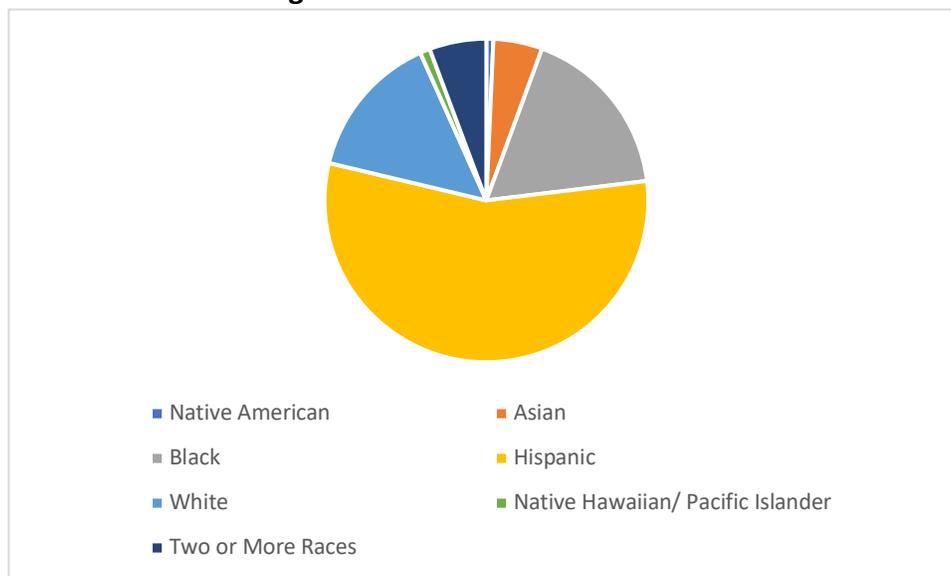
<sup>3</sup> Aurora Public Schools Educational Services Center. "Facts about APS." *Aurora Public Schools*, 24 Nov. 2020, docs.google.com/document/d/1WsiZ8P49U5EPKfVkcU2NBZQyXnBqD3ySSngTaL\_StEc/edit. Accessed 10 March 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Aurora Public Schools Division of Equity in Learning. "School Performance: APS Learning Communities." *Aurora Public Schools*, 6 Nov. 2020, sites.google.com/aurorak12.org/eil/school-performance#h.pak4GW5j-8X5X. Accessed 10 March 2021.

APS contains 65 institutions: four child development centers, 27 elementary schools, eight early childhood and elementary schools, six middle schools, six high schools, one academy serving grades 6 to 12, one vocational/technical college, 11 charter schools, and one home school support program.<sup>5</sup> The district’s budget for the 2018-2019 school year was \$410.9 million. According to administrators, 76% of the annual budget directly supported instruction during that academic year, a significant uptick from prior years.

Almost two thirds of APS students receive free or reduced-price lunches, about 14% are enrolled in special education programs, and nearly half speak English as a second language, with more than 75% of the ESL students speaking Spanish. (See Fig. 2 for more on the district’s students.)

**Figure 2. APS Student Enrollment**



Source: [aurorak12.org/about-aps/fast-facts/demographics/](http://aurorak12.org/about-aps/fast-facts/demographics/)

According to Ashlee Saddler, a one-time principal at APS’s Clyde Miller Elementary and later the district’s director of culturally and linguistically diverse education, APS has several pockets, particularly in the north where Community P is situated, with high concentrations of immigrant and refugee students. Saddler said the district carefully monitors its English language learners to ensure they receive services at their schools. While the state has seen an overall reduction in immigration, Saddler said APS remains committed to ensuring the students and their families receive quality educational services.

“We might continue to see some shifts, but they still need the same level of support,” Saddler said. “No matter what school you attend, you as an English learner should be receiving the same support that you would in any other building.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “Facts about APS.”

<sup>6</sup> All information attributed to Ashlee Saddler is taken from an interview with the case writer on 18 June 2020.

APS administrators say school safety is a high priority. Though the district has avoided the school shootings plaguing other parts of Colorado—the Columbine High School shooting in 1999 occurred just 20 miles southeast of Aurora—each APS school is equipped with PA systems, doors locking from the inside, and in-classroom telephones. The district requires each facility to develop its own emergency plan, which must include lockdown and evacuation procedures. The district has created an automated phone system to contact parents and staff members in the event of an emergency.

Due to the district’s demographic makeup and inability to address inequities in access to high quality education, APS students have historically struggled in academics. From 2015 to 2017, the district’s graduation rate hovered around 70%, about 15 percentage points lower than the national average of 85%.<sup>7</sup> That’s when the district began its transformation work, and APS started to improve. By 2020, the district had reached a 4-year graduation rate of 79% and dropout rate of 1.9%. Black students’ on-time graduation reached 82.5%,<sup>8</sup> meaning they were graduating at a higher rate than white students and outpacing the state average for African Americans.

“Over my 20-year span at APS, I have seen us going from very siloed work to being better focused around academics, social/emotional learning, and talent management,” said Jen Dichter, the Vaughn Elementary School principal who previously led Sable Elementary. “Now we ask, ‘what are the district’s priorities, and how are they aligned with the individual schools?’ There is more alignment now than ever before.”<sup>9</sup>

## **Understanding PLE**

The Relay National Principal Supervisors Academy. Colorado’s Turnaround Network. UVA-PLE. APS tried them all when its state school designations put it at risk for intervention after the 2015-16 academic year.

And, indeed, APS immediately saw results. But the most pronounced uptick occurred in Community P, where Wright had begun leading selected schools through UVA-PLE. Five schools, each on the state’s priority improvement list—Laredo Elementary School, Sixth Avenue Elementary School, Sable Elementary School, Vaughn Elementary School, and East Middle School—were selected for the program’s first cohort, meaning administrators from those schools would be given the explicit training UVA provides. Laredo, Sixth, Sable, and East immediately saw a jump to the performance designation (Fig. 3). The remaining school, Vaughn, moved to improvement.<sup>10</sup>

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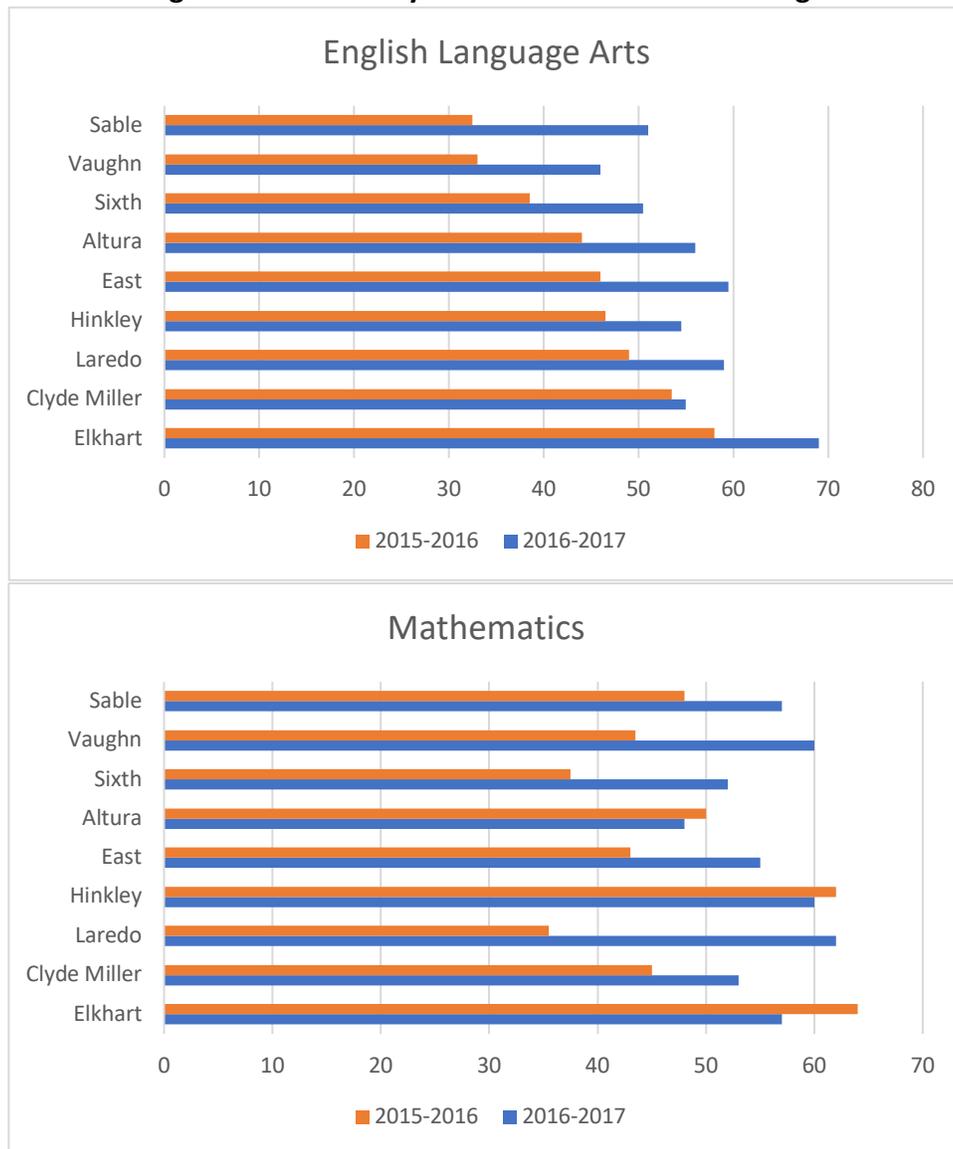
<sup>7</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. “Public High School Graduation Rates.” *U.S. Department of Education*, May 2020, [nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_coi.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coi.asp). Accessed 10 March 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Graduation data is provided by Aurora Public Schools.

<sup>9</sup> All information attributed to Jen Dichter is taken from an interview conducted by the case writer on 16 June 2020.

<sup>10</sup> All school performance data and state designations are provided by Aurora Public Schools.

**Figure 3. Community P School Performance Ratings**



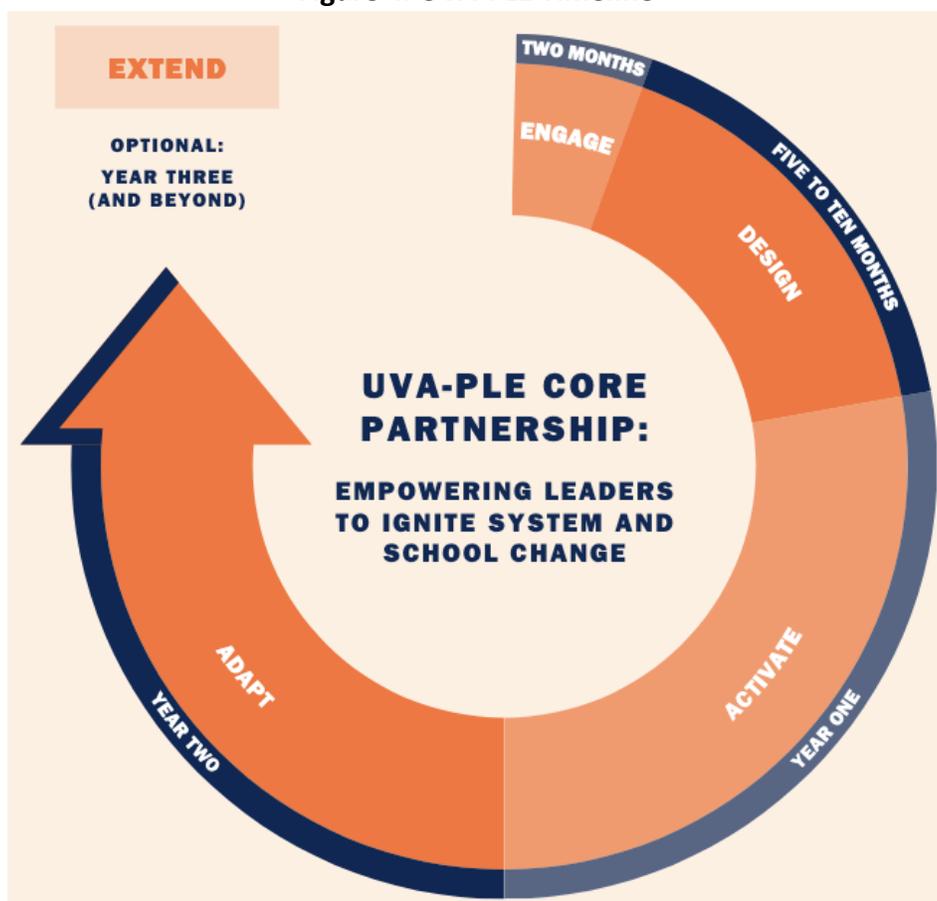
Source: Created by case writer using data provided by APS.

Wright attributed the success to PLE mapping directly onto the needs of the Community P schools. The three-year partnership focuses on how district leadership, talent management and instructional infrastructure can be more responsive to school needs, as well as promoting principal and teacher leadership growth and data-driven instruction. According to Wright, Community P was in desperate need of the collective leadership capacity, defined school excellence standards, and teacher coaching and accountability systems PLE was designed to help districts and their schools provide—and which has proven effective in longitudinal research studies.<sup>11</sup> “UVA gave us the foundation,” Wright said.

<sup>11</sup> Grissom, Jason, Susanna Loeb, and Benjamin Master. “Effective Instructional Time Use for School Leaders: Longitudinal Evidence from Observations of Principals.” *Educational Researcher*, 42(8), 2013, 433-444,

The core partnership typically operates on a two- to three-year timeline, with an option to extend further (Fig. 4). In the first six months to a year, PLE engages with a district, begins identifying needs, and develops strategies to address the needs. The process includes a core district assessment, selecting priority schools for targeted improvement via the first cohort, examining leadership change or development opportunities, and crafting the work’s vision and scope. PLE designers say they develop long- and short-term strategies to put districts both on the path to improvement and in a position to sustain change. During the first six months of the timeline, district executives attend system design courses at Darden School of Business Executive Education, and PLE analysts help the leaders take ownership of what they need to change in their daily practices to serve their schools more effectively.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 4. UVA-PLE Timeline**



Source: UVA-PLE

[cepa.stanford.edu/content/effective-instructional-time-use-school-leaders-longitudinal-evidence-observations-principals](http://cepa.stanford.edu/content/effective-instructional-time-use-school-leaders-longitudinal-evidence-observations-principals). Accessed 10 March 2021.

<sup>12</sup> See [www.darden.virginia.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/UVA-PLE-Brochure-2018.pdf](http://www.darden.virginia.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/UVA-PLE-Brochure-2018.pdf) for more information about UVA-PLE.

In the first PLE execution year, school and district leaders from the selected cohort of schools visit UVA for one week of summer executive education programs to learn strategies, typically via business case studies and lessons from effective K-12 transformation efforts, to improve students' educational outcomes. Leaders are later invited to three days of winter programming to reinforce what they've learned and how the strategies have played out in their districts. PLE provides at least three site visits, as well as a Principal Supervisor Summit and year-round off-site support, during the period.

In participants' second year, leaders learn to adapt their transformation approach and turn their focus toward expanding the reach and longevity of promising strategies. School and district personnel are again invited to UVA for summer and winter executive education, not only to continue their journey, but also to share successes and failures with others in the partnership. Districts can select a second group of schools to join UVA-PLE in year two. APS made Elkhart Elementary School, Altura Elementary School, Clyde Miller Primary School, and Hinkley High School its second cohort. PLE personnel provide three more support visits, another principal summit, and off-site support throughout the second year.

Finally, districts like APS might elect to broaden the PLE approach to other areas of the district, bringing in yet more cohorts, or deepen involvement for existing participants. APS elected to broaden PLE to more schools and bring in custom support at the central office level. District administrators began to scale what they had learned and identify how all their schools could benefit. According to PLE data, 80% of partners are like APS and extend their partnership journey.<sup>13</sup>

Saddler, who was part of cohort two as principal of Clyde Miller, said bringing the partnership to scale was built into her earliest lessons:

“One of the things I will never forget was when one of the facilitators said we needed to ‘invite, include, and inspire.’ It was from one of the first instructors I got to listen to speak. I so much appreciated the inspirational part of UVA. All of what they kind of set up, the foundation, was monumental. I appreciated the fact that it wasn't this step-by-step roadmap and principalship by numbers. It was about making us think, making us apply business principals to education... Talk about drinking from a fire hydrant. It was a lot.”

According to Biaze Houston, who was in the first cohort as principal of East Middle School, the “game changing” foundational PLE tool was the context-based 90-day planning process.<sup>14</sup> PLE program administrators work with engaged school personnel to develop the plans biannually. Together, they build semester-long strategies for laying out district-specific goals and

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<sup>13</sup> University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education. “What does change take?” *Virginia.edu*, 2020, [www.darden.virginia.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/UVA\\_PLE\\_2020\\_Brochure\\_FNL.pdf](http://www.darden.virginia.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/UVA_PLE_2020_Brochure_FNL.pdf). Accessed 10 March 2021.

<sup>14</sup> All information attributed to Biaze Houston is taken from an interview conducted by the case writer on 17 June 2020.

accomplishing them. And, they establish specific benchmarks so the district can check its progress as it moves through each semester.

“I have done work with the state on unified improvement planning and timelines, but they are too broad and long to have immediate impact,” Houston said. “The 90-day plan allows you to evaluate as you go.”

**Getting Up Again**

For all their synergies with PLE’s support systems, the five APS schools engaged in the partnership backslid in their second year. Four schools, including one new to the list, earned the priority improvement label in the 2017-18 academic year (Fig. 5).

**Figure 5. APS Community P State Designations**

	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019
Elkhart	Performance	Performance	Performance	Performance
Laredo	Priority Improvement	Performance	Priority Improvement	Priority Improvement
Altura	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement	Improvement
Sixth	Priority Improvement	Performance	Improvement	Improvement
Sable	Priority Improvement	Performance	Priority Improvement	Improvement
Vaughn	Priority Improvement	Improvement	Priority Improvement	Performance
Clyde Miller	Improvement	Performance	Performance	Performance
East	Priority Improvement	Performance	Performance	Performance
Hinkley	Improvement	Improvement	Priority Improvement	Turnaround

*Source: Aurora Public Schools*

Wright said the schools struggled in part due to the vacuum left behind when he moved to the CAO position at district headquarters. As the assigned Community P “shepherd”—the UVA-PLE term for a change initiative champion and liaison between the PLE team and district—Wright had been effective at communicating with the principals at each of the learning zone’s schools. Other changes in leadership, primarily moving principals between schools, exacerbated the community’s issues in year two. “There were three or four key individuals that were new to the process,” Wright said. “We didn’t carry any consistency. And my job at that point was to leave that community to scale out the process.”

As CAO, Wright didn’t plan to abandon the first-year results PLE had helped Community P achieve. He wanted to redouble APS’s commitment to the practices learned via the partnership.

“The idea was to bring coherence to a structure that was all over the map,” Wright said. “Maybe it was by design at the beginning, but for me, it is hard to support an initiative if you are doing 9,000 different things. When you build in an infrastructure, you define and settle on what is flexible within that structure, then you can support it.”

According to Wright, the Community P principals and administrators used what they learned from PLE to introduce data-driven instruction, 90-day planning, and leadership strategies focused on supporting teachers’ professional development and making instructional practices more rigorous. Wright believed Community P already contained high potential principals who could serve as examples for the rest of the district. APS only needed to invest in them and use their strengths to adapt for context and deploy the transformation strategies.

It wasn’t simply Wright’s intuition driving him forward. Principals’ ability to support their teachers through instructional infrastructure has proven critical to the success of turnaround efforts. According to researchers Dallas Hambrick Hitt, Dennis Woodruff, Coby Meyers, and Guorong Zhu, “this type of effort may call for shifting paradigms of teachers and facilitating the development of new routines and practices within the broader organization.”<sup>15</sup>

Across Community P, principals agreed that Wright ensured they had the support they needed from the district to make lasting change happen in their schools. “I can’t overstate the value of Andre and his role as supervisor and his belief in my ability,” Houston said of her time as East principal. “There were folks who didn’t believe I could turn it around...Turnaround leaders need turnaround leaders for themselves.”

The research bears it out. In study after study, support from above the principal level is shown to be critical to the success of school turnaround efforts. But the support must be appropriate to the situation, according to a 2012 *Journal of Educational Change* paper.<sup>16</sup> In a qualitative investigation of four urban school districts, the researchers find differentiated support based on individual needs can both signal to schools what the district’s expectations are and give them the ability to implement non-standard solutions to performance challenges.

Once all nine Community P principals and schools were engaged in the PLE transformation process, teachers from the schools were coached to prioritize six-week instructional units with aligned standards. The teachers’ principals directed them through the process of performing interim assessments throughout the six-week periods. According to APS administrators, the individual teachers within the community truly bought into the work, and instructors from other communities were given the opportunity to observe the new strategies.

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<sup>15</sup> Hitt, Dallas Hambrick, Dennis Woodruff, Coby V. Meyers, and Guorong Zhu. “Principal Competencies that Make a Difference: Identifying a Model for Leaders of School Turnaround.” *Journal of School Leadership*, vol. 28 (1), 56-81, [journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/105268461802800103](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/105268461802800103). Accessed 10 March, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, Stephen E., Blair Mascall, Suzanne Stiegelbauer, and Jaddon Park. “No one way: Differentiating school district leadership and support for school improvement.” *Journal of Educational Change*, vol. 13 (2012), 403-430, [link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10833-012-9189-y](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10833-012-9189-y). Accessed 10 March 2021.

In Community P, Wright expected his team members to be in schools for 80% of each week. The team divided its time based on schools' identified needs and unique 90-day plans. Wright also advocated for several schools to obtain additional financial support through the differentiated school support structure.

But it was the structures preached at UVA that Dichter said made the greatest difference. Prior to the PLE intervention, Community P didn't have the personnel or organizational framework necessary to deliver district support to the schools in the way they needed it. Saddler agreed:

“After an intense seven days at UVA, I didn't look at the materials for a month. Then, when I started to plan, it was all there. It was amazing. Because of the recursive nature of the program, change was not something we talked about on day two and never again. It was consistent—it was a constant throughout. They were having us think so deeply, and the cognitive load that was expected was insane, but I have not gotten that level of training since [then]. Going to UVA is food for your brain.”

### Examining the Results

After the 2017-2018 school year, Community P once again saw a performance rebound. (See Fig. 6 for APS's turnaround timeline.) More work needed to be done, but only two schools, Laredo and second PLE cohort school Hinkley, remained below the state's priority improvement threshold for intervention. One priority improvement school, Vaughn, had leapt all the way to performance during Dichter's first year at the school as principal. And once again, Community P schools had achieved the largest growth percentiles in the district.

**Figure 6. APS Transformation Timeline**

<i>End of AY 2015-2016</i>	Five Community P schools are labeled “priority improvement,” putting them at risk of state intervention.
<i>AY 2016-2017</i>	First cohort of Community P schools initiate UVA-PLE.
<i>End of AY 2016-2017</i>	All schools in Community P move out of the priority improvement designation.
<i>March 2017</i>	Andre Wright transitions from Community P learning director to interim chief academic officer at the district level.
<i>AY 2017-2018</i>	Second cohort of Community P schools joins PLE.
<i>End of AY 2017-2018</i>	Four Community P schools fall back into priority improvement designation.
<i>March 2018</i>	Wright named district's permanent chief academic officer, begins scaling instructional shifts to entire district.
<i>AY 2018-2019</i>	Aurora Public Schools accelerates scaling PLE transformation efforts to entire district, adding schools to the partnership.

<i>End of AY 2018-2019</i>	District closes achievement gap with state and four Community P schools are labeled “performance.” Two Community P schools remain on state watch list.
<i>AY 2019-2020</i>	APS continues engaging with PLE. COVID-19 pandemic disrupts the school year.

*Source: Created by case writer.*

APS Community P contained zero performance schools in the 2015-2016 academic year. For the 2018-2019 school year, four schools were given the designation. One school, Elkhart Elementary, had maintained the label throughout the transformation process, but even it had seen steady improvement, going from a Colorado School Performance Framework rating of 54.3 in 2015-2016 to 63.3 in 2018-2019. The school also earned the Colorado Department of Education’s Centers of Excellence Award, which recognizes Title I schools in the state with high levels of longitudinal growth, in both 2017-2018 and 2018-2019.

The other three performance schools—Clyde Miller, Sable, and East—each made notable individual improvements.

*Clyde Miller*—Clyde Miller had been mired at the improvement level for years, maintaining an SPF rating below 49 prior to the turnaround effort. After PLE implementation, the school improved to a student achievement rating of 54.5 in 2016-2017, 54 in 2017-2018, and 58.5 in 2018-2019. The school mostly avoided the second-year backslide affecting others in Community P and maintained its performance rating after the 2017-2018 school year.

According to Saddler, Clyde Miller’s primary issue had been leadership, which tended toward “fear and favoritism” and ignored the outside community. The school had employed no instructional coaches, which have been proven valuable in turnaround efforts,<sup>17</sup> professional learning communities, or rigorous data use. “During team meetings, there was never discussion of instruction,” Saddler said. “It was always talking about kids in a disparaging way. PLCs did not happen. They kept using the word data, but it wasn’t clear what they meant by that.”

Saddler set out to focus Clyde Miller on instructional infrastructure, as well as recurring formative and summative assessments. She began to look at discipline in new ways, addressing the high percentage of minority students affected and changing the school’s punitive culture.

*Sable*—Sable had been close to state intervention for the three academic years from 2012-2013 to 2015-2016, being tagged throughout with the priority improvement designation. The school jumped to performance in 2016-2017, but Dichter transitioned to Vaughn Elementary as principal in the 2017-2018 school year and Sable fell back to an SPF rating of 36. Its new

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<sup>17</sup> Wolpert-Gawron, Heather. “The Many Roles of an Instructional Coach.” *Educational Leadership*, vol. 73, 56-60, [www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/jun16/vol73/num09/The-Many-Roles-of-an-Instructional-Coach.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/jun16/vol73/num09/The-Many-Roles-of-an-Instructional-Coach.aspx). Accessed 10 March 2021.

principal following that year joined the PLE program and helped nudge the school back to improvement for the 2018-2019 year.

Dichter had been principal for seven years before she left the role. She said the most critical shifts Sable made in the wake of the PLE intervention were developing its professional learning communities and focusing on data-driven instruction.

“When I was at Sable, we were dealing with old curriculum,” Dichter said. “We knew that in order to produce better results, we had to dig into the standards differently—and the texts. ‘What does the planning need to look like based on the data?’ We had to put some feelings on the back burner.”

Assessments were also critical to building the data needed to drive the curriculum, Dichter said. Once her teachers felt the data was being used to improve their teaching and student outcomes, real change began to happen. “It took a long time, but the benefits outweighed losing certain things,” she said.

*East*—East Middle School made a drastic jump from priority improvement (41.6 SPF) in the 2015-2016 academic year to performance (56.7 SPF) in 2016-17 and maintained performance SPF scores of 57.3 and 58 in the following two years. Like Elkhart Elementary, East earned the Colorado Department of Education’s Centers of Excellence Award in 2017-2018 and 2018-2019.

Houston, who led the school during its first turnaround year, said discipline was key. During the previous principal’s tenure, the school had become dependent on suspensions and harsh punishment to deal with behavioral issues, Houston said. In addition to distrusting their students, teachers and administrators had developed contentious relationships among one another.

“The structures weren’t in place to support effective collaboration,” Houston said. “They did have some planning times and...PLCs, but it wasn’t monitored. As a result, there were a variety of attempts and approximations, but teachers did not really know what to do.”

Houston wanted to bring faculty and staff out of their silos and into a collaborative environment. She eliminated the school’s dean position entirely, moved her assistant principals out of the central office, hired two new assistants in her second year, and put teachers in positions where they could succeed. The effort not only allowed the school to use data in a more effective way, it helped with behavioral issues, Houston said. As the school’s students moved between classes, more administrators were engaged with them, which discouraged the safety issues previously arising during transitions.

Houston and her team also eliminated lockers and changed East’s bell schedule to create a staggered class release and fewer crowds in the halls between instructional periods. Referrals and suspensions decreased dramatically. “It was important to build relationships with students

and families,” Houston said. “I wanted to continue to be that intermediary between staff and students.”

### **Spreading Systems Across the District**

Because each APS learning community director had used a different approach to transformation after the 2015-2016 school year, the district’s schools and communities had lost continuity. The solution was to bring new APS schools into UVA-PLE and standardize aspects of the transformation and instructional approach, focusing on strategies which had been successful. In his first several years as CAO, Wright leveraged Community P as a lab, identifying effective practices before initiating efforts to expand them into other communities.

Prior to engaging in the district-wide transformation process through PLE, Wright said APS suffered from outdated curriculum. UVA-PLE offered an update via its six-week instructional units and curriculum resources to support identified standards. Administrators achieved commitment to change across the district by directly engaging with teachers to create their instructional units.

APS focused on meeting standards set by the UnboundEd institute. The institute’s grade-level appropriate instruction and curriculum standards are designed specifically to disrupt systemic racism. Wright and other district administrators insisted all APS principals understand their expectations were high. APS worked with PLE to structure monthly learning days for principals and teachers. The district aligned its assessments to the UnboundEd standards and provided access to Illuminate Education, a user-friendly platform designed to help administer assessments, understand standards, and identify opportunities to improve instruction during the designated data-driven instruction days.

APS gave each of its community directors a staff support team to help them develop enhanced approaches to leadership coaching, align district support to instructors’ 90-day plan needs, and create opportunities for school leaders to learn from one another. The community directors helped expand the impact Wright initiated, enhance new-teacher development, and focus on equity in education.

Principals noticed the transformation. In a focus group, one administrator summarized the positive momentum many others had highlighted. “There has been a huge shift over the last five years,” the principal said. “It does feel like there’s an alignment here that I never saw before. We do have some things in common that’s supported by a belief system.”

Still, some principals in the same focus group said they needed more concrete strategies to proceed in their transformation. Challenges remained in aligning and supporting such a diverse group of schools. “We are still receiving too many mixed messages from [the] central office regarding what we do and do not have autonomy to make instructional decisions,” one principal said. “Too much [is] left to interpretation.”

## Taking the Long View

Just how significant was APS's growth from the start of the district's turnaround efforts to the end of the 2018-2019 school year? Turnaround experts say highly significant—one of the state's top-three school districts in size gained two points on the state average for performance ratings, a remarkable improvement. For five straight years, the district increased both its English language arts and mathematics performance percentages, with growth district-wide over the period of 5.8% in both disciplines.<sup>18</sup> In math, the district outperformed the state in 2019 median growth.

District officials point to the achievements of English language learners, minority students, students with disabilities, and those who qualify for reduced-price lunch as evidence of their progress. English language learners saw their highest ever median growth percentile in math of 52%, an increase of 4% from 2017-2018 to 2018-2019. And black and Hispanic students had closed the graduation gap with APS's white students. By 2019, all three groups were graduating at nearly the same rates: 76.7% for black students, 76.3% for Hispanics, and 76.5% for whites. In 2020, while Hispanic students had not closed the gap, they did outperform their counterparts statewide. And black students had surpassed white students in graduation attainment.

"We still have a lot of work ahead of us, but we are a district that has proven year after year that we will not accept the status quo and continue the hard work of improving student outcomes," Munn said. "I am especially proud that equity is at the heart of our work every day and am honored to work with staff members who recognize the strengths that all of our students bring to our classrooms."<sup>19</sup>

Community P's initial turnaround mission statement was "Disrupt, Invest, Create and Continuously Refine." Wright said he believes the community achieved that goal. By the end of the 2018-2019 school year, 80% of learning Community P 12<sup>th</sup> grade students had graduated, and 80% of learning Community P students in grades three to 11 were proficient in both reading and math, as measured by district assessments.

By 2020, APS's district wide performance rating had increased for three straight years and reached an all-time high of 49.1, and every non-charter APS high school had topped a 70% four-year graduation rate for the first time. APS's seven-year graduation rate had also shown a notable improvement, increasing by 5.6 percentage points to 86.6%. It, too, was an all-time high for an APS cohort. Finally, the district's student matriculation rate to two-year, four-year, and career/technical schools reached yet another all-time high of 52%.

Still, amid the tumultuous 2020-2021 school year, APS district leaders knew a significant challenge remained—sustaining their improvement and continuing to bring new student-

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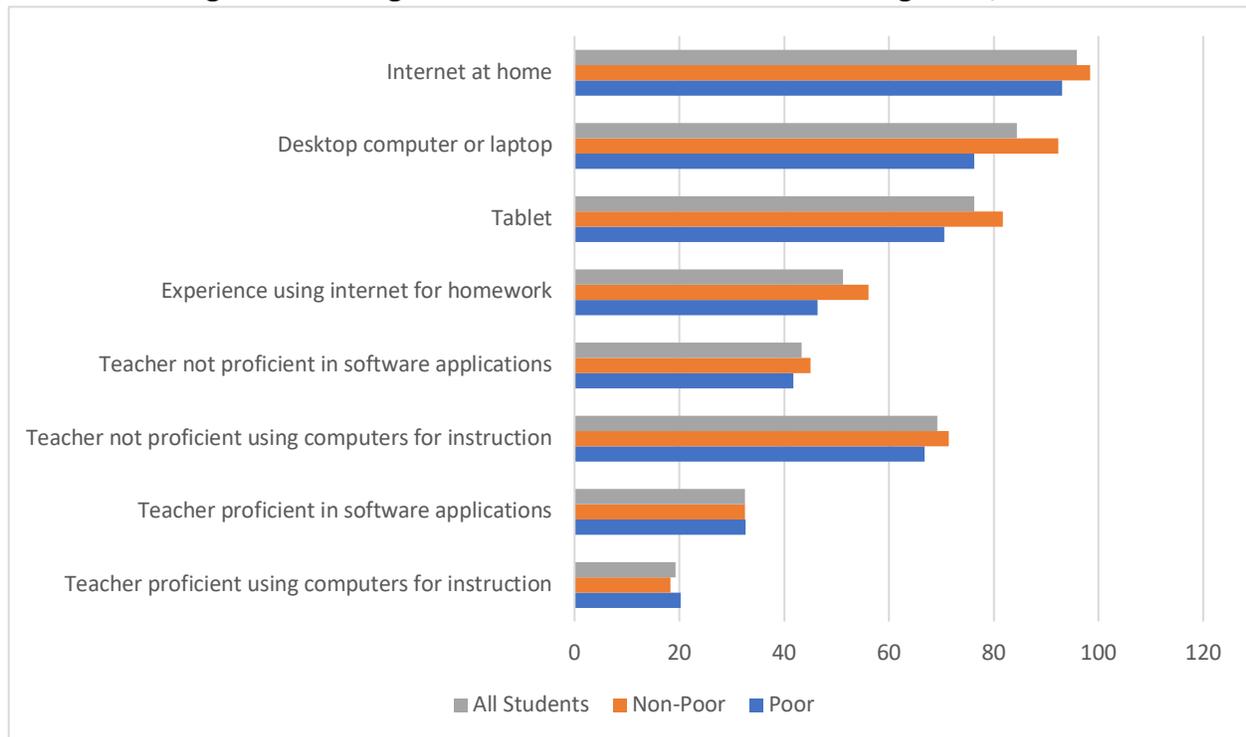
<sup>18</sup> Christiansen, Corey. "Equity Drives Improvements in Aurora Public Schools." Aurora Public Schools, 15 Aug. 2019, [aurorak12.org/2019/08/15/equity-drives-improvements-in-aurora-public-schools/](http://aurorak12.org/2019/08/15/equity-drives-improvements-in-aurora-public-schools/). Accessed 10 March 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Christiansen.

focused strategies to the entire district. The COVID-19 school closures and changes in classroom procedures had disrupted the district, like so many others. And research by the Economic Policy Institute showed minority students in large urban districts like APS had suffered the most due to the pandemic, largely due to technology access, experience, and past instruction (Fig. 7).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, APS was likely to face considerable personnel issues due to the crisis.

Dichter, however, said the district was up to the challenge. “We always say teachers are the single biggest influencer of student achievement,” she said. “It is a diverse community, and I love it. Our response is ever-changing.”

**Figure 7. U.S. Eighth Graders’ Access to Online Learning Tools, 2017**



SOURCE: <https://www.epi.org/publication/the-consequences-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-for-education-performance-and-equity-in-the-united-states-what-can-we-learn-from-pre-pandemic-research-to-inform-relief-recovery-and-rebuilding/>

<sup>20</sup> García, Emma, and Elaine Weiss. “COVID-19 and student performance, equity, and U.S. education policy.” *Economic Policy Institute*, 10 Sept. 2020, [www.epi.org/publication/the-consequences-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-for-education-performance-and-equity-in-the-united-states-what-can-we-learn-from-pre-pandemic-research-to-inform-relief-recovery-and-rebuilding/](https://www.epi.org/publication/the-consequences-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-for-education-performance-and-equity-in-the-united-states-what-can-we-learn-from-pre-pandemic-research-to-inform-relief-recovery-and-rebuilding/). Accessed 10 March 2021.