

## *The right move?*

Marshall High and other turnaround high schools, in Chicago and nationally, face a thorny dilemma. Higher-performing students are being siphoned off through competition, driving down enrollment and raising tough policy questions about the future of these schools.



# Tough choices for turnarounds

By Lorraine Forte  
Editor-in-Chief

Tamoura Hayes started high school with big dreams for college that she already knew would be tough to reach. “C’mon,” she said. “I go to Marshall High School.”

Obviously, Marshall’s long-standing academic failings weren’t lost on Tamoura, who went on to say that she “wasn’t even supposed to be here.” Marshall was her last option. Her family couldn’t afford the private school that was her first choice, and she wasn’t offered a slot at Raby, one of the newer high schools sprouting up on the West Side.

Tamoura was one of the Marshall freshmen profiled in “Class of 2011,” the award-winning issue of *Catalyst In Depth* that examined the challenges of High School Transformation. (The issue was published in February 2008 and is available online at [www.catalyst-chicago.org](http://www.catalyst-chicago.org).) As Tamoura entered 9th grade, Marshall had just begun the initiative. The goal was to make rigorous coursework the foundation of high school improvement—an idea tailor-made to suit studious teenagers like Tamoura.

Discussions about the many academic and social ills of urban high schools tend to give scant attention to the Tamouras at these schools. In other words, the kids who don’t get into trouble, who show up to school regularly, whose parents support their education but lack financial resources. These teens, like Tamoura, are savvy enough to know that their best option for getting into a good college is to bypass the neighborhood high school.

As one researcher said, “What are you doing about all the smart kids?”

**LAST YEAR, THE DISTRICT EMBARKED** on a turnaround at Marshall, sinking millions into campus renovations and bringing in a new principal and mostly new teachers and staff. The success of turnarounds, at Marshall and other struggling high schools, is of national as well as local importance: Secretary of Education Arne Duncan made the strategy a key part of federal education efforts.

## LACK OF PREPARATION

In 2010, 48 high schools in Illinois were eligible for federal School Improvement Grant funds. Ten schools received grants ranging from \$5.8 million to \$1.1 million. Academic performance at these schools stands in stark contrast to state and national averages.

SCHOOL	ACT	AP
National average	21.0	18%
Illinois average	20.5	19%
DePue High, DePue	18.3	NA
Egyptian High, Tamms	18.2	NA
Peoria High, Peoria	17.0	0
Thornwood High, S. Holland	16.8	8%
Thornridge High, Dolton	16.7	9%
Thornton Twp., Harvey	16.2	11%
Phillips High, Chicago	14.4	NA
Harper High, Chicago	14.3	4%
Marshall High, Chicago	14.0	0
Fenger High, Chicago	13.8	5%

Source: ACT data are from state school report cards. Data on AP courses are from an analysis of federal data by ProPublica, an independent investigative news outlet; data on some smaller districts is not available.

For this issue of *Catalyst In Depth*, Deputy Editor Sarah Karp visited Marshall regularly during its first year in the turnaround program. From her reporting, it’s clear that the school is making progress. The climate is calmer, the special education department no longer faces state sanctions, and teachers have begun to collaborate regularly and focus on good instruction.

Marshall, of course, still faces big hurdles. For one, school leaders must balance the need to keep enrollment up—or face losing staff, as Marshall did eventually—with the challenge to improve academics. Nationally, other urban districts are in similar straits, trying to figure out how to handle the challenge of reforming large, failing neighborhood high schools. That’s a very tough job when a school is expected to take virtually any student who walks through the door, from the one who is ready for accelerated classes to the student who wants to transfer in but has

a transcript filled with F’s—and a bad attitude to boot.

Part of the answer is to focus on serving the good students, the Tamouras of the world, first.

That idea will undoubtedly anger some reformers, who will view it as a call to abandon at-risk teens. It’s not. Society—not just schools—has to figure out how to help youth who are on the road to dropping out. When students like Tamoura show up, they’ve already made a critical leap. They’re motivated to learn, and they need the adults around them to respond to that motivation.

For the neighborhood high school to survive, individually and as a larger concept, academics have to improve. Schools have to offer honors and Advanced Placement classes, for one. And teachers need students who, even if they aren’t quite ready for it, are at least motivated to tackle high school-level work.

Donald Fraynd, a former principal of Jones College Prep who now heads the CPS turnaround initiative, says that big neighborhood high schools still have a role to play in the district. The turnaround high schools are “getting better and better at catching students up,” with more students achieving higher-than-average growth in reading skills and recovering credits toward graduation. (See story on page 8.)

These accomplishments are heartening signs that the turnaround program may, finally, put long-failing neighborhood high schools back on track. And they’re a sign that, while poverty and social ills can be significant barriers to learning, they are not insurmountable.

Chicago’s high schools still have a long way to go, although at *Catalyst* press time, a new report from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research showed that high schools are, in fact, doing better academically than many observers believed to be the case.

At Marshall, there’s another small but encouraging sign that academics are on an upward trajectory.

In her senior year, Tamoura finally started getting more than 15 minutes’ worth of daily homework. ■

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Marshall High graduates cheer as they are announced as the Class of 2011. Over the course of their high school career, the school tried and scrapped one reform effort, then became part of the district's turnaround program. [Photo by Marc Monaghan]

## Last-ditch tactic

Chicago is considered a national model for its turnaround program. Historically one of the district's worst schools, Marshall High joined the turnaround program last year and has posted some gains on the ACT. But progress could be undermined by a sharp drop in enrollment and transfers during the year. **COVER STORY: PAGE 5**

### 10 Beating the odds

Tamoura Hayes attended Marshall as two major reform attempts got underway, but never got the accelerated classes she craved to prepare her for college.

### 15 A special push

Marshall's turnaround team found a special education department that was dysfunctional and faced state sanctions. Job No. 1 was to put special education on the front burner.

### 18 Suspending progress

To raise its graduation rate, Marshall needs to keep students in school by lowering the exorbitant number of out-of-school suspensions. But so far, in-school suspension hasn't done the trick.

**ON THE COVER:**

A member of Marshall's chess team practices as he gets ready for city and state competitions. In recent years, Marshall's team has been competitive with higher-performing schools. [Photo by Jason Reblando]

## DATA GUIDE

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- Enrollment of students within attendance boundaries at turnaround high schools
- Snapshot of schools receiving federal School Improvement Grants
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- Schools with in-school suspension rooms issue more out-of-school suspensions

## ON THE WEB

Another challenge to establishing a rigorous curriculum is the pressure on teachers to get students to pass their courses and be on track to graduate. Marshall's freshman on-track rate rose 20 percentage points in the 2010-2011 school year. [www.catalyst-chicago.org](http://www.catalyst-chicago.org).



# Last-ditch tactic

**With a big federal grant and a brand-new staff, Marshall is one of more than 800 high schools across the country that have launched turnarounds. Many of these schools face a dilemma: They need students to keep their budgets and staff intact, but find it tough to improve academics with too many low-achievers.**

By Sarah Karp

Outside Marshall High, the day is cool but sunny. The school has been power-washed from a dingy red to a bright maroon. In place of the old broken concrete, weeds and rusted poles—remnants of a basketball court—is a newly sodded football field and a newly planted arboretum full of skinny young trees.

Inside Marshall, the smell of fresh paint hovers in the air. It is the first day of school, September 7, 2010.

These renovations have been dreamed about for decades at Marshall, located in the impoverished East Garfield Park community. As far back as four years ago, blueprints for them were on display in the principal's office. But only last year did the dream become reality, when Marshall joined the district's turnaround program and got a substantial investment in the physical condition of its campus, a signal that the school is making a fresh start.

Kenyatta Stansberry, Marshall's no-nonsense new principal, is dressed in a fitted black suit with a short skirt. But she's ready for a hard, long

day—her hair is in a ponytail and she's wearing comfortable black clogs.

Stansberry is in Room 129, the community room, where portraits of her predecessors line the wall. Today, the room is a holding place for students who show up but aren't enrolled. Some were dropped from the rolls because of poor attendance. Others want to transfer in, or out. Most of the teens are with their parents, who sit clutching papers, waiting.

At a front table, counselors write students' names on yellow Post-It notes and hand them to Stansberry. Going over to the families, she asks the parents why their children want to come to Marshall—or leave it, as the case may be.

One mother explains that her son wants to leave Manley High, also in East Garfield Park.

"Why?" Stansberry asks. The mother shrugs.

Stansberry turns to the young man. "Why?"

"I got enemies there," he mumbles.

Stansberry picks up his transcript and looks it over. His grades are not horrible, so she quickly decides to accept him. As a mother of two sons, Stansberry is not one to send a young man to a school where he might not be safe, especially if he is doing OK academically.

## WHY IT MATTERS

CPS and the federal government are pumping millions of extra cash into a cadre of long-failing high schools, in hopes of finally improving them. But systemic obstacles still stand in their way.

- The efforts might be too little, too late. With more school options and competition, turnaround high schools have lost students and cannot support the same comprehensive program they once did. Principals need enough students to keep their budget from bottoming out, but hesitate to take students who have virtually no chance of graduating.
- School culture and climate at turnarounds has improved, but these schools still have a long way to go with academics. Marshall's incoming 9th-graders have lower test scores than freshmen who enrolled just four years ago. Marshall also lacks honors and Advanced Placement classes.
- High suspension rates have long been a problem in schools like Marshall. Out-of-school suspension increases the likelihood that a student will drop out. But CPS has yet to develop a comprehensive strategy or standards for in-school suspension programs.
- Marshall's dysfunctional special education program contributed to the decision to place the school in the turnaround program. So far, the school has improved services to special needs students and the state Board of Education removed its sanctions. The next step: mainstreaming more students and improving their education.

**Opposite page:** Counselors hand out schedules at an event held a few weeks before the first day of the 2010-2011 school year. The event, which included a mechanical riding bull, was an opportunity for Marshall's staff, most of them new, to introduce themselves to students. **[Photo by Cristina Rutter]**



Principal Kenyatta Stansberry constantly multi-tasks, juggling the deluge of work involved in running Marshall High. She checks her email, talks on the phone and checks in with students and staff in person. [Photo by Jason Reblando]

In this case and others, Stansberry has the student sign a contract with her. “We will try this out,” she says.

Other students get turned away. One of them, a tall, thin young man with cornrows, comes in with his mother. Stansberry glances at his transcript. He’s also from Manley.

“We can’t take him,” she tells his mother. “Look at all his Fs.”

A hint of desperation in her voice, his mother says that the young man can’t go back to Manley, but doesn’t give specifics. “Sorry,” Stansberry says, unflinching.

Later, realizing that her radio is missing, she rushes to her office and finds it on the desk, crackling with static. Before she can sit down, her secretary asks her to meet with some parents who are waiting.

Stansberry has told her counselors not to give schedules or uniforms to current students with attendance or discipline problems. Instead, students must bring in a parent for a meeting.

In this case, a young woman has shown up with her mother. Stansberry asks the girl why she cut so many classes last year.

Then she makes her expectations clear. “I am not going to hold you responsible for last year. I am just letting you know I am not dealing with that nonsense. You will be on a contract, and you will have to check in with me.”

Marshall is Stansberry’s second turnaround high school—she came to the school from Harper High in Englewood—and her third time as an administrator of a low-achieving high school.

That experience gave her the idea to put problematic students on a contract, warning them that they must abide by stipulations such as attending class and keeping their grades above a certain level.

Within the first weeks of school, nearly 80 students at Marshall are required to sign a contract.

Stansberry tells the girl to go get a school uniform, put it on and go to class. But the girl says she is going home today and will come back tomorrow, ready to start.

“You are starting out real stupid,” her mom tells her, though she does nothing to make the girl comply.

**THE CHALLENGES EVIDENT ON THE FIRST DAY** of school hint at the deep problems facing Marshall. After decades of academic decline, and on the heels of a failed attempt to transform the school by bringing in better curricula, the turnaround could well be viewed as a last-ditch effort at reinvention.

The success or failure of the turnaround has national as well as local implications, since U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has made the strategy a centerpiece of federal reform efforts.

But the odds are clearly steep. For one, the high price tag is unsustainable over the long term. And turnaround schools, both in Chicago and in other urban districts like Philadelphia, are experiencing significant enrollment loss—driven largely by the rapid expansion of charter high schools—that in some ways hinders improvement.

The enrollment decline also raises a difficult question for policymakers: Is it worth a substantial taxpayer investment to try to fix a failing school that is losing students?

Chicago Public Schools and the federal government have invested millions in Marshall and four other turnaround high schools: Fenger, Orr, Phillips, and Harper. Nationally, the federal government budgeted \$3.5 billion for the school improvement grant program, which awards money to schools that adopt one of four turnaround models.

But in the past three years, Marshall’s enrollment has dropped by a third, as fewer freshmen enroll for the first time and fewer sophomores, juniors and seniors return. Last year, only 16 percent of students in the attendance area enrolled at Marshall—a decline of 10 percentage points in five years.

Overall, turnaround high schools enrolled 20 percent of students in their attendance areas last year, down from 31 percent five years ago.

Fenger experienced the sharpest population loss last year, enrolling 418 fewer students than projected. Observers note that a new charter high school, the Larry Hawkins campus of Chicago International Charter Schools, opened in the Altgeld Gardens area and drew in students who otherwise would have enrolled at Fenger. The school also experienced negative publicity the year before, because of the beating death of student Derrion Albert.

Around Marshall on the West Side, at least 12 new schools have opened in recent years, including nine charters, two military schools and the new Westinghouse High.

Citywide, all but six of the 27 charter high schools that have opened in Chicago since 2005 are on the South or West sides and serve primarily black students—the same students who not too long ago would have ended up at one of the schools that have become turnarounds.

**NATIONALLY, 27 PERCENT** of the schools that have received federal school improvement grants have lost 20 percent or more of their students in recent years, according to a *Catalyst Chicago* analysis of federal data.

Like Chicago, these urban districts—such as Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Miami, St. Louis and Cleveland—are struggling to figure out the role of failing neighborhood high schools that have been on life support for decades.

In Philadelphia, schools are facing a double whammy similar to Chicago’s: losing students while opening charters and other new, small schools, says Eva Gold, senior research fellow at Research for Action, which examines Philadelphia’s education initiatives.

Under former Superintendent Paul Vallas—who came to Philadelphia from CPS—the goal

was to open new schools so that big neighborhood high schools could shrink, Gold says.

But Superintendent Arlene Ackerman's plan was to focus squarely on improving neighborhood high schools, and the federal school improvement grants are a centerpiece of that. Ackerman says the key to improvement will be fixing the high school selection process. (At *Catalyst* press time, the Philadelphia School Reform Commission had fired Ackerman, giving her a \$900,000 buyout of her contract.)

Some of the turnarounds in Philadelphia are managed by charter operators and students must apply to attend. Meanwhile, others are run by the Philadelphia school district and must take any student who walks in the door.

"These schools don't know who they are going to get until the first day and sometimes they have to reconfigure and re-roster in October," Gold says. "That is very disruptive."

Phillip Lovell, vice president of federal advocacy at the nonprofit Alliance for Excellent Education, which focuses on high school reform, says that there are simply not enough good charter school providers to take the place of all the low-performing, large urban high schools.

Even if these schools serve a smaller population, he adds, the investment is worthwhile.

"If the school has half the population, that should aid them in creating a personal learning environment," Lovell says.

But as large high schools shrink, they lose the benefits that a comprehensive high school provides. Schools like Marshall and Phillips lacked stellar academics, but they were able to offer perks to attract students and keep them engaged. They had enough students to support strong sports programs and band classes, vocational programs and numerous after-school clubs. Students also had a host of electives to choose from.

"We are working in a different world than just two years ago," says Debbra Lang, the managing director of high school turnarounds at the Academy for Urban School Leadership. CPS contracts with AUSL to run Orr and Phillips, as well as 10 elementary school turnarounds.

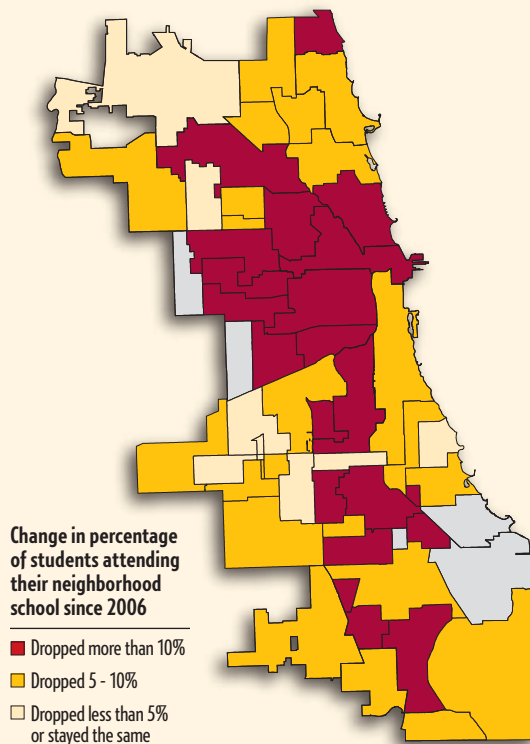
Like Marshall, Orr has scrapped career and technical tracks, such as those for information technology and health occupations. Lang says Orr will focus on academic enhancement and art and music education.

"When you have such a small population, it really limits the options," she says. "At New Trier, with 4,000 students, you can offer 20 different English classes."

Lang doesn't believe the district should abandon the idea of a neighborhood high school. "It is an honorable idea to have a school that says, 'You all come and we will design a program for you,'" she says. "Schools should be anchors of their community."

# Leaving the neighborhood

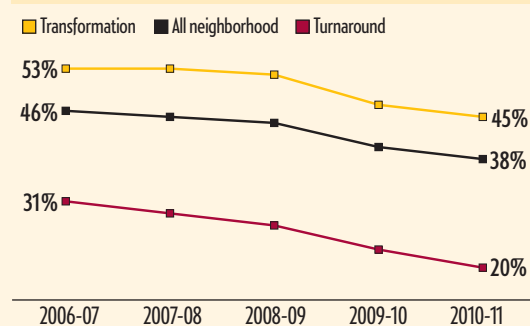
For years, the percentage of teenagers who attend their neighborhood high school hovered around 50 percent. But since the district has increased school options, primarily charter schools, that percentage has fallen and is now just 38 percent. As a result, principals scramble to find students and district officials admit that they need to take a hard look at the role of these schools—many of which are struggling academically.



## LOSING STUDENTS

With more school options in Chicago, neighborhood high schools are drawing fewer students from within their attendance boundaries. This is especially true of the schools that are receiving substantial funding for turnarounds and transformation.

### STUDENTS LIVING WITHIN ATTENDANCE BOUNDARIES



Source: Catalyst Chicago analysis of Chicago Public Schools data

AS MARSHALL'S TURNAROUND GOT UNDERWAY, Stansberry faced a dilemma: She needed students to keep her budget from bottoming out and to justify the investment, but she was under pressure to show improvement at the school and didn't want just any student.

## A NATIONAL PICTURE

The U.S. Department of Education set aside \$3.5 billion in federal stimulus funds for School Improvement Grants, money for drastic actions to improve the lowest-achieving schools. States have three options: turnaround, or firing and replacing teachers and administrators; restart, handing the school over to a charter operator; or transformation, providing more resources to schools and ensuring that strong leadership is in place. As of August 2011, 827 schools across the country have been awarded the money.

### A DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

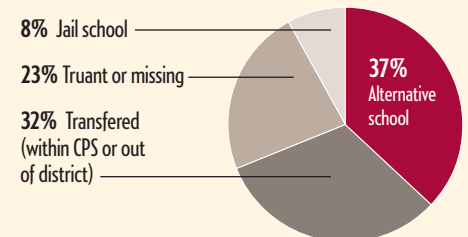
- 73% Use the transformation model—the least-drastic action
- 50% Are high schools, although high schools make up only 20% of all schools
- 58% Are in urban districts
- 27% Lost a fifth of their students between 2005 and 2009
- 50% Are predominantly black or Latino

Source: Catalyst Chicago analysis of U.S. Department of Education data; Portrait of School Improvement Grantees, Education Sector

## BOWING OUT

Marshall and other turnaround high schools experienced significant enrollment decline over the past year. Some of that is due to neighborhood students who never enrolled in Marshall. But, between June 2010 and June 2011, some 352 students left Marshall without a diploma. Of those, 140 left after the school year started in September.

### WHERE THE 140 STUDENTS WENT



Source: Marshall High School data

Over the summer of 2010, Stansberry told her staff to send out letters to students who were woefully behind in credits, suggesting that they enroll in an alternative school. But sending out the letters was risky. Teachers are allocated based on enrollment, so if too many students

were no-shows, the school would lose staff and have to reshuffle schedules late in the game.

In all, some 161 students who were supposed to be sophomores, juniors and seniors did not come back in the fall.

During the summer, Stansberry got word from central office that only 720 students were likely to enroll, instead of the originally projected 841. She staffed the school accordingly.

Then, in September, 772 students showed up, as sophomore enrollment exceeded projections.

Marshall's sole sophomore English teacher, Christina Tilghman, suddenly had classes of more than 40 students. Tilghman grew up in Boston, and earned her master's degree from the Harvard School of Education. When she took the job at Marshall, it was the first time she had a classroom of her own.

Two months after school began, on November 11, two new sophomore teachers arrived to relieve some of the pressure on Tilghman and her colleagues. The day she got the news, she

stood by the stairwell on the first floor, looking shell-shocked as she watched students pass by.

In a completely flat tone, she says she was ecstatic. Her excitement was tempered by an incident earlier that day. A student, one with whom she thought she had developed a bond, exploded in anger and cursed at her. She threw him out of her room.

"I have had better days," Tilghman says. "These are not the conditions I imagined them to be. I am trying to merge reality with my goals."

The disruption caused by enrollment fluctuation continued throughout the year.

After January—a time when enrollment usually slowed down—about 100 students asked to transfer into Marshall, says Matt Olson, the school's programmer. Some were from charter schools, others from traditional schools.

Those who lived outside Marshall's attendance area were generally sent to their neighborhood school. But Marshall had little choice except to take those students within its atten-

dance area, and ended up enrolling more than 65 new students mid-year, Olson says.

AUSL's Lang says that Phillips and Orr were in the same situation, taking in students from military schools, charters and elsewhere during the year. She makes another important note: These students show up mid-year, well after the district's deadline for nailing down enrollment and allocating money for staff, but do not bring any extra dollars with them.

The schools that these students left keep the money and teachers, but no longer have to deal with the students or be held accountable for their test scores.

"There are benefits of competition, and there's the price of competition," Lang says.

**EVEN WITH THE CONSIDERABLE INVESTMENT** in Marshall, nearly a quarter of the students who enrolled in September 2010 left before the school year ended. Most of these students went to alternative schools, or simply disappeared. CPS data show that Marshall sent more students to alternative schools than any other district high school in 2010-11.

The investment at Marshall included staff that other schools typically do not have: a social worker, a counselor and a psychologist to work with troubled students; data analysts; additional security guards; and an in-school suspension room attendant.

Extra supports, such as anger management group sessions, did help some students who appeared to be on the wrong path. At the end of the first year, Marshall's attendance rate had improved and the environment was calmer, with fewer students getting in trouble. Recent test scores show marked improvement as well. (See graphic on page 14.)

But some students were too much in the hole academically, or too distraught emotionally, for the interventions to succeed.

The challenge is evident one day in November, a few days after the first report cards come out. Stansberry starts the day in a good mood. Shawn, one of her "starting five," a group of young men she took under her wing and meets with weekly if not daily, has received a report card with no F's for the first time in his two years in high school.

But as soon as Stansberry sits down at her desk, she gets bad news. Another young man, Kevin, has just stormed out of the disciplinarian's office. She tells a security guard to bring him to the office. While she waits, Stansberry puts a tea bag in a mug, fills it with water and puts it in the microwave.

"Why did you just walk out of 136?" she says to Kevin when he arrives.

He tells her he just wanted a uniform.

"What makes you think you can walk into my

## The turnaround and transformation vision

Donald Fraynd, the sprightly former Jones College Prep principal, has led the district's school turnaround effort since its inception. At *Catalyst Chicago* press time, he was serving as interim chief of schools for a group of high schools on the South and West sides. But his heart remained with the cadre of struggling schools that he's charged with improving.

Fraynd says these big neighborhood high schools, like Marshall and Phillips, do have a role to play in the district's future.

**ON SHIFTING ENROLLMENT:** Fraynd is counting on the new chief portfolio officer to take stock of the student population and seats available in neighborhoods. "This 'big picture' analysis and better planning on the part of our overall portfolio will ease these issues moving forward."

Fraynd acknowledges that turnaround principals are in a precarious position: They need students, but don't want to take just any student. "I want to be clear: We do not selectively filter out badly behaved or poor-attendance students. With those who are severely under-credited in a way that makes it mathematically impossible for them to graduate [by age 21], we do educate students and families about alternative options. However, if [they] do not want to exercise those options, we welcome them to stay at the school."

**CREATING A SCHOOL THAT CAN SERVE HIGHER-PERFORMING STUDENTS:** "It is a challenging balance to meet students where they are and to prepare them for college and work. We strive to build turnaround schools around the needs of the students. As time has gone on, we are getting better and better at catching our students up. For example, we are getting better at Read 180 (a program for struggling readers) and have seen more and more students gaining two-plus years of reading growth in one year."

"We have talked about Aventa online credit recovery as well. As we go into our fourth year, we are getting better and better at helping students stay on pace in these courses so that they can recover badly needed credit. We require a double block of math and reading in the freshman year and require all seniors to take math, so we have more time invested in the classes they need to acquire critical skills."

"As the elementary schools in the region improve and as we improve at striking balance, we are hopeful."

**BUDGET CUTS AND SUSTAINING TURNAROUNDS:** "It is something we think about a lot. We are trying to make sure we build capacity [and] systems. So, for example, in the first couple of years we see a lot around discipline. We might need a few deans. But after a few years, [problems] should slow down and we would only need one dean. Another example is teacher visits. At first we observe them weekly. But in a year or two the teachers should have enough know-how not to need weekly visits."

**ON THE SCHOOLS CHOSEN FOR TRANSFORMATION, A LESS DRASTIC TURNAROUND MODEL IN WHICH TEACHERS KEEP THEIR JOBS:** "We made the selection by looking at the schools that were on the upward trajectory. We wanted some sign that things were looking up. Then we went to the school to see which staff were open to it. We needed to know that it could fly with the humans [already] in the building." "Each school has a project plan. We are doing weekly risk management meetings in which we check in to make sure that project plan is being followed, and every three weeks we have accountability meetings in which we [shine a] spotlight on the outcomes."





These young women walk out of Marshall as graduates in June of 2011. They started high school with 349 peers, but only 140 graduated with them. [Photo by Marc Monaghan]

building without a uniform on [already]?" she says. "You either are going to follow the rules in my house or you are going to get out."

Stansberry gets on her walkie-talkie and tells Assistant Principal Angel Johnson to stop by her office with a shirt for Kevin.

"You don't get another shirt," she said to him.

After Kevin leaves, Stansberry tells Johnson, "This is why we are transferring him." Johnson says that his guardian doesn't have bus fare for him to get to school.

Stansberry nods as she dumps a large heap of sugar into her tea. She and Johnson agree that the situation is ridiculous. Kevin is a ward of the state, and his guardian should be making sure he gets to school and has clean clothes to wear.

"It is so sad," Stansberry says.

Next, she calls Shawn to her office. She acknowledges his improved report card, but she's not entirely happy with him. Stansberry has taken a deep interest in these boys, and gets emails every time they mess up. Shawn struggles with his temper. "He will walk out of class without even thinking," she says. Stansberry says it is her job to keep him grounded.

When Shawn walks into her office, she asks him what happened at Saturday school, where he reportedly had some kind of incident. "I

didn't want to be there," Shawn says.

Stansberry tells him, "I do not want to have emails about you walking out of class. You have grown. You don't need to do that anymore."

By spring, one of the starting five has transferred to an online credit recovery program inside Marshall. Three of the young men, including Shawn, are still in school, getting mediocre grades but not failing.

The fifth young man, Deion, is having problems. Since school began, Stansberry has tried to convince his mother to transfer him to an alternative school that might be better able to help him. But so far she has refused. "He is in special education, has an explosive behavior problem and is 19 with only one credit," Stansberry says. "He can stay here until he is 21."

In May, Stansberry and her two assistant principals run into Deion in the hallway. He is a tall, thin young man with an unkempt afro, his khaki pants sagging and an oversized black hoodie enveloping him. He tells the three that he was kicked out of a class because he didn't have his uniform on.

Johnson notes that she tried to give him a uniform shirt, but he wouldn't put it on.

"I am not walking around here with a 5X shirt," Deion says.

Johnson says that is the only size available. Stansberry sighs. "I have a shirt in my closet. Go get it," she says.

"What are we working on?" Assistant Principal Matt Curtis says to Deion, getting in his face. "Progress, not perfection." Deion unzips his hoodie and walks away.

Curtis says that Deion would like to go to another school, but they are reluctant to take him because of his difficult behavior. "He can't sit still for too long," Curtis says.

The in-school suspension attendant, Lonnie Felters, is also getting sick of Deion. "He refuses to do any work," Felters says.

Deion winds up in in-school suspension often, for a range of problems—no uniform, walking into class with no books, being disrespectful. "It seems like the moment he gets to class, they shoo him out," Felters says.

A week later, in mid-May, Deion stops coming to school. He misses one week, then two. He never comes back.

"You can't save them all," Stansberry says.

*(Editor's note: Kevin and Deion's real names are not being used to protect privacy.)*

Tell us what you think. Go to [www.catalyst-chicago.org](http://www.catalyst-chicago.org) to leave a comment, or email [karp@catalyst-chicago.org](mailto:karp@catalyst-chicago.org).

# Beating the odds

**As CPS tries yet again to improve Marshall High School, one young woman and her friends must grapple with a lackluster education as they step into the future.**

By Sarah Karp

Whenever the one-note, mechanical “bing” would sound, Tamoura Hayes’ nerves began to unravel. Around her, the hallway would quickly fill up, turning into Lake Michigan on a stormy day, loud and thrashing.

In the fall of 2007, Tamoura was a quiet 14-year-old freshman at Marshall High. Every time she moved from one class to the next, she did her best to avert her eyes from anyone and just blend in. Often, she had to duck around fights or avoid bullies. She didn’t tell anyone about the dread she felt.

Today, Tamoura is 18 and can laugh about it.

Tamoura and her class—the Class of 2011—began and finished high school as the district debuted first one, then another grand experiment to improve Marshall and other struggling schools. Freshman year brought “High School Transformation,” an initiative in which at least \$80 million was spent districtwide on new curricula and instructional coaches.

As Tamoura and her classmates embarked on their senior year in fall 2010, Marshall became a turnaround school, starting over from scratch. Curricula changed, again. The school got a new principal, again—the third in four years. The staff changed, again, as every teacher, administrator, janitor, security guard and whoever else worked at Marshall had to reapply for his or her job.

For decades, Marshall has been known for two things: its winning girls’ basketball team and its stand-

ing as one of the lowest-achieving high schools in the city. The turnaround is, perhaps, a last-ditch effort to change the latter legacy.

The odds were not good for Tamoura and the rest of her class. They were more likely to drop out than graduate, and they had a dismal chance of scoring above a 20 on the ACT, the score needed to get into a minimally selective college.

The year Tamoura was a freshman, only two seniors reached that benchmark.

**IN SOME WAYS, MARSHALL** and the other perennially failing high schools in Chicago are like Afghanistan—a place where many wars, against poor academics and high dropout rates, have been started but never won.

The evidence of these lost battles isn’t just in low test scores. The school attracts few high-achieving students, so few they can be counted on one hand. One measure of whether the turnaround initiative is worth the substantial investment of taxpayer money will be whether Marshall attracts students who are ready for accelerated classes, or even regular high school-level courses.

Over the years, Marshall has vacillated between offering and scrapping an honors track for better students. From 2001 to 2008, the school had one or two Advanced Placement classes a year. But only two students out of 441 earned a 3 or more on the AP exam, the score needed to earn college credit. Since 2008, AP classes have disappeared.

Yet the vision for teaching and learning at Marshall is less clearly defined than the more immediate

goals for improving the school’s culture and climate. In the turnaround’s first year, much of what went on in the classrooms was up to the teacher, with two exceptions. First, every day, in every subject area, teachers were required to present an exercise to prepare students for the ACT. Second, student-level data from regular assessments were to be used to help teachers understand what they needed to re-teach.

As the end of the school year approached, Assistant Principal Matt Curtis kicked off a process to create a uniform list of skills that every teacher would cover. But the process was difficult. Teachers and administrators struggled to accept the idea that they should have challenging curricula, even though most students were working below grade level. At first, there was little talk about students performing on grade level or above.

Melissa Roderick, a University of Chicago professor and senior director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, says that many high school reform initiatives focus all their attention on the students who aren’t ready for high school.

“What are you doing about all the smart kids?” says Roderick, the principal investigator for the Network for College Success. The network, a program of the university’s School of Social Service Administration, helps high schools come up with systematic strategies to increase students’ college-preparedness.

**THAT MARSHALL HIGH SCHOOL** is not and has not been a destination for

the super-studious was not lost on Tamoura her freshman year. Tamoura, who had a round, baby face, showed up on her first day of high school with her hair done, her maroon polo shirt ironed and the new shoes she’d saved up to buy spotless.

But her excitement was squashed by chaos. Unlike Tamoura, few students had bothered to come to orientation and get their class schedules in advance. Counselors buzzed around the sweltering auditorium the first day of school, creating schedules and handing them out to waiting students. Tamoura was bewildered by the empty classrooms.

At the time, she talked about her dreams—but even then she doubted that the school could help her accomplish them.

“I would like to go to Harvard or Spellman,” Tamoura said. “But come on—I go to Marshall High School.”

She went on to say that she was “not even supposed to be here.” Her first choice was Providence St. Mel, a West Side private school with a strong reputation for getting students into college. Her family couldn’t afford it. Her second choice was Al Raby, then a relatively new, small CPS high school. She wasn’t offered a spot in the school.

Tamoura knew about the city’s elite selective enrollment high schools, but her grades and test scores weren’t high enough. She admitted she didn’t do particularly well at Beidler Elementary, and said “that was half my fault and half my teachers’ fault.” More than two-thirds of her 8th-grade class was not performing at grade level.



Tamoura Hayes invited a friend to go with her to the senior prom. Tamoura started her high school career as a shy freshman, but says she came out of her shell and developed self-confidence. She was voted homecoming queen. [Photo by Cristina Rutter]

Tamoura was not in good shape emotionally either. At the end of 7th grade, when Tamoura was 13, her mother died unexpectedly of heart problems.

In the end, when it came to figuring out high school, Marshall was the only option. Like many students at Marshall, Tamoura has deep roots there. Her father, Tyrone Hayes, played basketball for the school in the mid- to late-1980s and now works as a security guard, standing watch on a corner of the third floor. He met Tamoura's mother there, and her mother gave birth to their first child when she was still a student. Tamoura is the baby of the family, and her sister and two brothers also went to Marshall.

**AT THE ONSET OF TAMOURA'S** freshman year, the promises of High School Transformation brought excitement. Experts had spent a long

time researching and vetting curricula that was supposed to be especially good for bringing students who are behind up to speed. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation had put its weight behind the effort, and there was money for resources that Marshall had lacked for years.

Carts heavy with laptop computers came rolling into classrooms. Science labs were stocked full of equipment. English classes had piles of paperback books so new that the covers cracked when opened.

Teachers, too, were enthusiastic. And Principal Juan Gardner had a full-time mentor, a man who had success running Lane Tech, one of the city's top high schools.

Halfway through Tamoura's freshmen year, she and 28 of her peers got plucked to be in an honors track—the first one the school had had in years. Gardner said he

thought of it as an investment in the school's future.

But the initiative never gained a strong foothold. Attendance was atrocious, with half the students missing on any given day. Teachers complained that some of the lessons were project-based, difficult to teach when the mix of students changed on a daily basis.

Gardner, who by most accounts was a hands-on leader who connected well with students, left after he got entangled in a scandal involving the girls' and boys' basketball coaches. The leader of High School Transformation left the district. Officials changed the name: No longer would it be described in ambitious, far-reaching terms. Instead, it was simply called IDS, for Instructional Development Systems.

Then Arne Duncan, the CEO who had spearheaded the strategy, went to Washington D.C., to become sec-

retary of education, and support dwindled. CPS administrators have already announced they will no longer evaluate IDS next year, effectively putting it to rest.

The district and other stakeholders hope the turnaround effort doesn't suffer the same fate. But one example illustrates that the strategy isn't foolproof. In 2008, Orr became the first turnaround high school when CPS turned management over to the Academy for Urban School Leadership, which brought in a superstar principal, Jammie Poole, from Memphis. Within a year, newspapers, including the *New York Times*, wrote glowing accounts of the new leadership and improved school climate.

But academic achievement never rose significantly. In the middle of last year, AUSL got rid of Poole and brought in an entirely new management team.



Though Marshall has struggled academically, in recent years its chess team has reached the city and state finals. Players competed against students from selective schools like Walter Payton and Whitney Young. [Photo by Jason Reblando]

“Orr is a new school,” says Debra Lang, head of high school turnarounds for AUSL. In 2011, 4 percent more students met standards. “It shows what leadership and plans and organization can do in a short time.”

**FROM DAY ONE**, Tamoura found high school relatively easy. The High School Transformation curricula were supposed to be rigorous, but Tamoura says she never worked

particularly hard and never received any grade below a C.

In her sophomore year, Tamoura joined cheerleading, debate and the allied health program. She started coming out of her shell, saying she risked letting people see a little more of her personality, which she describes as “goofy, fun, energetic.” And “a little weird”—Tamoura says she loves pop singer Katy Perry, while most of her classmates are into rap star Lil Wayne.

At the end of Tamoura’s sophomore year, Gardner left and was replaced by Sean Clayton, a principal from a small elementary school that sends a lot of students to Marshall. Most teachers and students say that Clayton and his team never got a handle on discipline or teaching and learning. Tamoura, who got along well with Gardner, says she and others didn’t connect with Clayton.

That year, the honors track

stopped, although there were still some accelerated classes. Tamoura says she was frustrated that there was little recognition for students who were doing well.

In January 2010, the district announced that the school would become a turnaround. Tamoura and her friends, about to embark on their senior year, were immediately worried. Would their favorite teachers be gone? How would the new teachers be?



Eleven teachers were hired back. The senior counselor and several of the security guards, including Tamoura's dad, kept their jobs.

Tamoura was happily surprised by the changes she saw when she came to school last September. A lot of the students who caused trouble were gone. "The clowns who do their work are still here," she said then.

Tamoura especially fell in love with art and the art teacher, Analizza Chan. In other classes, the work also was more challenging.

"We get homework every day from at least two or three of the teachers," she said in November. During her first three years of high school, she had only 10 to 15 minutes of homework a day, so little she could get it done between classes.

**BUT STUDENTS ALSO STRUGGLED** with some of the new academic intensity.

Tamoura's math class was taught by Tyler Meeks, who came to Marshall from his first teaching job: working with over-age 8th-

graders at Crane, another tough high school. Tamoura and her classmates call it pre-calculus, but the actual name is "discrete math," defined as a class in which problems are simply stated so that few prerequisites are needed.

One day in mid-December, the students were taking a test and struggling with 23B, a division problem with functions.

"This is a brain-buster," said one.

"I need help," another said.

"Why are you giving this to us, man?" Tamoura commented.

Meeks finally tells the class to cross the problem out and move on. They continue to moan and groan.

"Ladies and gentlemen, there are 30 of you," Meeks says. "The reason I cannot get to everyone is that I am only one person, and I have to keep stopping."

"I am so lost," Tamoura says.

Exasperated, Meeks finally tells the students to hand up their answer sheet. Even though it's a test, he will go over the questions.

"I pray I don't get this in college," Tamoura says out loud to no one in particular, as Meeks writes the problem on the chalkboard.

"This is below where you should be," Meeks answers back. After class, Meeks looks stunned. "We have gone over this multiple times."

Later in the year, Tamoura notes that she was a bit discouraged in the summer between her junior and senior year when she went to an enrichment program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The other participants were from high schools across the city, including one of the top schools, Whitney Young. Most of the rising seniors had already taken subjects like calculus, but she hadn't even taken pre-calculus yet.

Tamoura's friend Brianna Walker notes that she got a lot out of Meeks' math class, but "the one thing I regret is that I wasn't able to take this class before I took the ACT."

In high-achieving schools, that would be the norm.

**AT THE BEGINNING** of the 2010-2011 school year, Assistant Principal Matt Curtis did not force teachers to adopt any prescribed curricula.

Instead, he insisted that teachers be aware of what's on the ACT and make sure that students are prepared for it.

Curtis fundamentally believes that he can improve academics at Marshall by closely monitoring data, seeing how performance changes class by class, teacher by teacher. When teachers stop by his office, he's quick to show them a spreadsheet showing where their students are lagging. He then presses them about what they can do differently.

At the end of the year, however, Curtis decided to implement a required framework. Following the lead of a suburban school that has a track record of moving low-performing students forward, he introduced an approach called the "three-legged stool."

The legs are skills, content and technique. The seat is student achievement. The floor is classroom management.

The difficulty in developing curricula for a school like Marshall is evident when Curtis attempts to kick off the process. At an English department meeting in early May, teachers are trying to determine the eight skills students should be taught in each grade.

"We need to be explicit: What should a student be able to do?" Curtis says.

Immediately, he gets push-back. Eight skills, says freshman English teacher Fadia Afenah, seems ridiculously too few, considering students need so many. And getting one skill down might take the re-teaching of others, and that can take a while.

"It's one thing to say students should know how to dissect a sentence, but be aware that means starting with lessons about nouns and adjectives," Afenah says. She spent the first few weeks of the year reviewing the basics with her students, such as the difference between common and proper nouns. Some students seemed bored, but others needed the review.

Curtis pushes back. Don't think of the steps that get you to the end skill, think of the end skill, he says.

"I am not saying you are wrong,

## EXPLORE SCORES

The five turnaround high schools enroll the district's lowest-scoring 9th-graders, making the job of improving academics even tougher. The EXPLORE test is taken in the fall of 9th grade. The highest score is 25.

SCHOOL TYPE	COMPOSITE	READING
Magnet/selective	18.6	18.3
Charter/contract	13.5	12.8
Military	14.7	14.0
Neighborhood	13.4	12.7
<b>Turnaround</b>	<b>12.3</b>	<b>11.7</b>

## INCHING UP

Turnaround high schools saw the biggest improvement in Prairie State and ACT scores compared to other high schools—but they started out behind everyone else also.

SCHOOL TYPE	PSAE (CHANGE)	ACT (CHANGE)
Selective	84% (+4%)	24.4 (+.39)
Magnet	36% (+3%)	18 (+.23)
Military	30% (-1%)	17.6 (-.08)
Charter	25% (+1%)	17.1 (+.09)
Neighborhood	17% (0)	15.7 (-.05)
Turnaround	9% (+4%)	14.6 (+.46)
Marshall	6% (+3%)	14.6 (+1.0)

## NO ADVANCEMENT

CPS has been lauded for bringing Advanced Placement classes to more schools and students over the past decade, but neighborhood high schools still have a long way to go to achieve equity with selective and magnet schools. Since 2007, higher-performing neighborhood high schools have experienced a 10 percent decline in the number of students earning AP college credit.

TYPE OF SCHOOL	AP ENROLL.	AP CREDIT
Selective	12%	54%
New schools	8%	16%
Magnet	5%	25%
Top neighborhood	4%	17%
Bottom neighborhood	4%	2%

Note: Includes only those high schools with AP classes both in 2007 and 2010. Charter schools are not included because they did not report data or were too new to have any students in AP classes.

Source: Catalyst Chicago analysis of Chicago Public Schools data

but the ACT tests higher-order thinking skills, and we need to outline the skills we must teach to get there," Curtis insists.

The chair of the English department, Alison Dodson, suggests they give Curtis eight skills, but also come up with 16 to 19 that they will "at least dip their toe into" during the year.

"Don't get frustrated," Curtis tells them. "This is hard. There is no right answer."

Curtis also tells them not to worry about content. "We don't teach books, we teach skills," he says. "I don't care if you use Shakespeare or USA Today."

The teachers split into small groups and start talking. He tells them they will be working on this all summer. Eventually, Curtis wants his cadre of enthusiastic young teachers to be so adept at teaching that high-performing students will trust that they can get what they need from Marshall.

That goal has yet to materialize. Last year, 20 students who tested high enough to be put in honors classes were projected to enroll, but only four showed up. This year, the administration decided it wasn't worth the effort to schedule an honors track for the freshmen, says Matthew Olsen, the school's programmer.

Instead, the hope is that teachers can differentiate instruction and challenge the students who can do accelerated work.

**TAMOURA SAYS SHE THINKS** one of the biggest problems at Marshall has been the lack of recognition and places to shine for more studious students. Courses never went beyond the now-shuttered honors classes, since Advanced Placement disappeared.

"Those AP classes could be used to get college credit," Tamoura points out.

By mid-May, Tamoura at least knows she's headed to college. Tyronne Hayes is delighted to report that while his baby girl didn't get into Spellman, she was accepted to Clark-Atlanta University and St. Cloud State University in Minnesota.

Hayes recalls that Tamoura was born prematurely—only three pounds—suffered breathing prob-

lems for the first few years and then lost her mom at a young age. "All those odds were against her," Hayes says.

But Tamoura's focus even convinced Hayes to go back to school himself. He enrolled in some online courses toward a college degree. "I want to be able to say, 'I got mine too,'" he says.

At the moment, Hayes is not exactly sure how he will pay for Clark-Atlanta, where tuition is about \$19,000 and a dorm room and meal plan cost an additional \$9,000. Paying all the costs out of pocket would eat up virtually his entire year's salary.

Hayes says they are hoping and praying that a few more scholarships will come through. Tamoura got a nice financial aid package, but still needs about \$7,000.

"I will sacrifice," Hayes says. "I will do whatever. I am not going to worry about that right now. I am just going to enjoy this moment. Everything is good."

Hayes says he hopes to stay at Marshall for 10 more years and see the school, and the community, evolve. Many people are trying to bring the school back to its glory days. "It is cool," he says.

Meanwhile, Tamoura emerges from a classroom wearing a tiara. Hayes explains that it is her birthday, and that her friends are planning a party.

Tamoura bows her head when asked about going to Clark-Atlanta University. "From the moment I got the letter, he [her dad] told me he was going to brag to everyone."

Tamoura is proud of the personal progress she's made since freshman year.

"I felt like I was a nobody. I had no self-esteem." Things are much different now—Tamoura was selected as homecoming queen. "That really, really boosted my self-esteem," she says.

Tamoura and her seven best girlfriends walk down to lunch and stake claim to a round table in the cafeteria. After they sing "Happy Birthday," they smear hot-pink frosting from cupcakes on Tamoura's face. Eventually she wipes it off,

but for the rest of the day, it leaves a pink glow on her brown skin. As she has become a young woman, Tamoura's face has thinned out and it is no longer the round and cherubic baby face, but regal.

When only a few cupcakes are left, the girls decide to give one to Principal Kenyatta Stansberry. They head down the hallway with an air of purpose and ownership. Tamoura leads the way.

Since their freshman year, the young women have seen two principals come and go and virtually an entire cadre of teachers replaced. Of the 349 students who enrolled with them, about 140 will walk across the stage with the girls in June.

So far, experts haven't figured out how to capitalize on the strengths these young women, and others like them, bring to school. They may not have top test scores, but they are earnest, motivated and intelligent students who, for one reason or another, wind up in neighborhood high schools that are still trying to find a formula for academic success.

Two of Tamoura's friends are going to Rockford Community College, one to Howard and one plans to join the Navy. One will go to Northeastern University on the North Side, a choice she made because she had a low ACT score and because she can get help taking care of her eight-month-old baby boy from family in Chicago. Another will go to Western Illinois in Macomb, though she will be on probation because she didn't quite meet the criteria for admission.

By mid-August, Tamoura abandons her plans to go to Clark-Atlanta University, the college she once called the school of her dreams. Instead, she decided to go to Western Illinois.

"It is cheaper and closer to home," she says. But still, she'll be the first in her family to go away.

No, things didn't turn out so bad for Tamoura and her friends. But, no doubt, things could have been better.

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Special education teacher Daniel Mallory meets with his colleagues. Mallory, one of the few teachers rehired under the turnaround, says that previous faculty members had lost faith in the ability of special education students to achieve. [Photo by Jason Reblando]

# A special push

**With a quarter of Marshall's students in special education, improving their achievement could make or break the turnaround effort.**

By Sarah Karp

Marshall has long been a candidate for drastic action, with the percentage of students meeting state testing standards lingering in the single digits for years. But when CPS leaders announced that Marshall would become a turnaround, there was an additional outside push: The state had sanctioned the school because of its poorly run special education program.

One in four students at Marshall is enrolled in special education—more than twice the district aver-

age, and more than in all but five other CPS high schools. Nationally, schools like Marshall—in the bottom 5 percent in a state—enroll a disproportionately high number of students in special education.

The impact on a school's performance is considerable, since students with special needs score lower on tests and are more likely to drop out.

At Marshall, over the past decade, not one special education student has met or exceeded standards on the composite Prairie State exam. If just a third of them had met state standards last year,

the school-wide percentage of students passing the exam would have nearly doubled.

Given the potential impact, the quality of education provided to special education students is more than a side note. It is, or at least should be, a central part of a school's push to make academic strides.

**THE ILLINOIS STATE BOARD** of Education sanctioned Marshall for failing to provide students with the services spelled out in their Individual Education Plans (required for all students who are diagnosed with a special need) and having inad-

equate IEPs. Some were generic. Others lacked information.

Rod Estvan, education policy analyst for Access Living, an advocacy group for people with disabilities, says that such situations often crop up when a school's staff gets overwhelmed and tries to match available services with students instead of trying to make services meet academic needs.

So far, Marshall has made some strides with its program. The state will no longer closely monitor the school next year, says Ann Horton, the Chicago supervisor of special education for ISBE.



Special education teacher Kyle Birch works one-on-one with a student in a math class. Birch has successfully transitioned five special education students from separate classes called “instructionals” into regular classes. [Photo by Jason Reblando]

But dramatic progress will take more time. “What we hope will be the outcome is that they will sustain these practices and the educational trajectory will improve for these students,” says Rhonda Marks, who worked with Marshall for ISBE.

Beyond the problems with services and shoddy IEPs is a larger issue, more difficult to correct: Students with learning disabilities (two-thirds of all special-education students at Marshall) spend more time in separate classes than is recommended by experts, and these classes often have watered-down curricula and low expectations. Estvan says teachers in separate classes are often confronted with students in different grade levels and instead of differentiating instruction to meet each student’s

need, they teach to the student with the lowest ability.

By law, special education students should be taught in the “least restrictive environment,” which means placing them in separate classes only as a last resort. Research is clear that co-taught classrooms, in which a special education teacher works alongside a regular education teacher, result in better outcomes for students.

Yet in 2009-2010, 57 percent of Marshall students with learning disabilities spent more than 20 percent of the school day in separate classes, according to a *Catalyst Chicago* analysis of data from CPS.

On average, only a quarter of students in other CPS high schools spent that much time in separate classes. Experts say that only stu-

dents with severe learning disabilities should be in separate classes for more than 20 percent of the day.

Students with behavioral disabilities also are isolated in separate classes at a higher-than-average rate.

This year, those numbers have barely budged, but there has been a concerted effort to mainstream students into regular classes.

**DANIEL MALLORY IS ONE OF THE FEW** special education teachers to be hired back by the turnaround team at Marshall.

The year before the turnaround, Mallory, then a brand new teacher, asked his colleagues about their students. Many times, they replied that the student didn’t want to learn, or that his or her emotional troubles

prevented it. There was little camaraderie among teachers, Mallory recalls. One teacher warned him to wear a helmet.

Mallory, a young teacher from a small town in Ohio, says these attitudes upset him. “If you are a special education teacher, your job is to understand,” he observes. “So why are you dismissing students as lazy or dumb?”

Mallory says these perceptions are to blame for problems with shoddy IEPs. “It just didn’t click that an IEP should be a function of academic needs.”

The new head of the special education department, Aaron Rucker, says that when staff sat down last summer to look at the IEPs, they were shocked. More than 150 needed to be rewritten.



“It was a little overwhelming for everyone,” Rucker says. “We had to make sure that what an IEP [stated], about the minutes in or out of a separate classroom, or with an aide, matched with what was happening.”

As the special education staff delved into the IEPs and got to know the students, they realized that some of the teens didn’t need to spend so much time in separate classes, called “instructionals.”

So special education teacher Kyle Birch moved five students from all-day instructionals into a few regular, co-taught classes. One young woman, Makayla, was a sophomore who had earned just half a credit but scored on par with other students on standardized tests. Another student, Jeremiah, had earned a D in math, but was outscoring the general population on benchmark math assessments. (Note: Both students’ names have been changed to protect their privacy.)

Both were earnest students who attended school regularly but had flown under the radar, their potential untapped. Makayla reads fluently, at a 12th-grade level, but is at only a 6th-grade level on comprehension. Birch says she has more strengths than some of her peers, yet the focus has always been on her deficits.

Jeremiah has trouble expressing himself verbally, and seems to be the quiet kid who was allowed to slide by.

“A lot of the time, the child should not be secluded in special education,” Birch points out. “It is just that we want to put them ‘over there,’ and not think about it.” CPS, in fact, has a disproportionately high percentage of students categorized as learning disabled, and African-American students are more likely to be placed in special education than any other racial or ethnic group, state data show.

Once Birch decided to move Jeremiah and Makayla, he had to convince their mothers. The task proved harder than one might imagine.

Vanessa Risper, Jeremiah’s mother, has two other children who were seniors at Marshall and among the

top students at the school. Both scored above 20 on the ACT and were looking at colleges.

But her youngest, Jeremiah, has always struggled, and gets scared around big groups of people—a remnant, Risper suspects, of times when he was bullied as a young child.

Jeremiah’s guard went up when his old teachers were fired and new ones hired with the turnaround. But once he came back to school in September, he liked it, Risper says. The school had a calm and orderly atmosphere, better suited to his personality.

Yet when Birch approached Jeremiah’s mother about placing him in a regular math class, she hesitated. Risper recalls hearing Jeremiah’s classmates over the years say—about themselves—that they were “just stupid anyway,” and would not try hard. Risper says she has never let Jeremiah think that he isn’t smart, stressing that just because he learns differently, doesn’t mean he can’t learn at all.

Jeremiah had been in separate classes since he was in 3rd grade, and Risper wasn’t sure about forcing a change. He was used to the small classes. Most of the time, it was just him, a teacher and a handful of students. Also, the work was not too difficult.

“I was nervous,” says Risper. “I thought that he is doing good, and we should just leave it alone.”

But Jeremiah’s father thought it would be a good idea to give him a chance. Now, Risper says, the transition has been good, mostly because of Birch’s support. Birch has Risper’s cell phone number, and she has his.

“That was new,” she says. “I like the fact that he will call me.”

Going to a regular class has boosted Jeremiah’s self-esteem. He even joined the chess team. “I love it,” Risper says. “It makes him sharper.”

Makayla’s mother sends text messages to Birch frequently. When she saw him at the end of the school year, she threw her arms around him.

“The problem was that we tended to look at all the things these

students can’t do, and not at all the things they can do,” Birch says. “If it is done right, it can be done.”

Rucker says the special education department is trying in other ways to mirror the regular education program. This year, the special education students went on a few college trips, and teachers are told that they need to work with the students on college readiness skills, getting them ready to take the ACT.

“We try to move in the same direction, though sometimes we might crawl whereas the regular class might be running,” Rucker says.

**CREATING THE RIGHT CURRICULUM** for special education students has been a challenge. There are few high schools that get it right, and the idea that students with learning disabilities need a different curriculum has strong traction.

Crystal Battin, like several teachers who came to the school with the turnaround, had been laid off from a suburban school and was happy to find a job at Marshall. Battin was surprised at the low skills of her new special education students. She had taught in wealthy Barrington schools, where the curriculum was accelerated and special education students who weren’t too far below grade level were nevertheless told that they were way behind.

Every student in Barrington took algebra in 7th grade. “This could send a special education student into a spiral,” Battin says.

In Barrington, Battin usually had one or two students who were reading at a 1st-grade level. “Here, I have half the class,” she says.

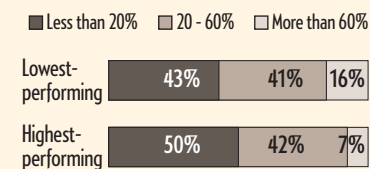
Her students span a broad spectrum, from those with behavior disabilities but decent academic skills, to those with profound learning disabilities. Battin, who thinks it doesn’t serve students to push them to learn geometry and science if they can’t write a sentence, has talked to the administration about modifying lesson plans.

Toward the end of the year, Assistant Principal Matt Curtis spearheaded a process to get teachers to develop a more unified curriculum.

## SEPARATE AND NOT EQUAL

Experts say it is usually better to have learning-disabled students in classes co-taught by a regular education teacher and special education teacher. Yet in the lowest-achieving schools, a higher percentage of students have learning disabilities and the chances are higher that these children will spend substantial time in separate classes.

### TIME SPENT IN SEPARATE CLASSES



Note: Citing a federal privacy law, CPS declined to provide data in cases involving groups of 10 or fewer students. Complete information was only provided for 292 schools out of about 600. Of these, 59 were high schools and 233 were elementary schools. Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.

The lowest-performing schools are in the bottom 25 percent on the composite ISAT. Highest-performing schools are in the top 25 percent.

The first step was to come up with a list of skills that each student should learn at each grade level and in each subject. The initial reaction of the special education teachers was that they should have a totally separate discussion.

Curtis quickly countered that notion. The school’s data show that special education students are not that far behind students in regular classes.

One day, Birch stops by to talk to Curtis. Even with all his optimism about Makayla and Jeremiah, he, too, is skeptical that special education students can be expected to learn the same skills. Curtis happily pulls up data, pointing to chart after chart of results from benchmark exams that show little difference between the two groups of students.

“Wow,” Birch says.

“If special education teachers want to do their own thing, then they once again are going to end up by themselves,” Curtis says. “They should be in on this discussion, up front, giving their opinions and being heard.”

Tell us what you think. Go to [www.catalyst-chicago.org](http://www.catalyst-chicago.org) to leave a comment, or email [karp@catalyst-chicago.org](mailto:karp@catalyst-chicago.org).



As warm weather set in at the end of the school year, Marshall Principal Kenyatta Stansberry had her staff organize Peace Day, with sessions on conflict resolution. Students who had lost friends and family to violence let go of balloons in remembrance. [Photo by Jason Reblando]

# Suspending progress?

**The goal of in-school suspension is to lower the number of students put out of school, but that goal is still elusive.**

By Sarah Karp

The rules of Marshall's in-school suspension room are written on the chalkboard at the front of the class: "No laughing. No cell phones. No talking. No putting your head down on the desk."

If a student finishes his or her work, a table is piled with books to read. There's also a worksheet they can complete, designed to make them think about their behavior.

At a big neighborhood high school, an in-school suspen-

sion room might seem par for the course. But at Marshall, the strategy has been tried before, failed before, and in recent years, didn't exist.

With the turnaround, however, it made sense to try it again. In the 2009-2010 school year, two-thirds of Marshall's students were suspended at least once, the second-highest out-of-school suspension rate among the city's high schools. Out-of-school suspension is a strong predictor of low test scores and high dropout rates, two outcomes the turnaround administration wanted, and needed, to rectify.

CEO Jean-Claude Brizard also has pinpointed in-school suspension rooms as one strategy to lower out-of-school suspension.

But it's not at all clear that in-school suspension rooms, at least as they are often implemented in CPS, will have the positive impact that supporters hope for. In fact, the data suggest the opposite.

Over half of CPS high schools had in-school suspension rooms in the 2009-2010 school year, according to the latest figures from the Illinois State Board of Education. But on average, these schools handed

down out-of-school suspensions to more students than those without in-school suspension rooms, a *Catalyst Chicago* analysis found.

One explanation is that schools with in-school suspension rooms have more serious, discipline problems than those without.

Another explanation is that CPS has no standards for in-school suspension rooms, so they are little more than holding cells that offer little or no education or counseling to help change behavior. A *Catalyst* survey of 53 high schools found that in the 16 with in-school sus-

pension rooms, supervision was provided by a variety of people, from substitute teachers to school deans. Only two schools had counselors who could talk to students about their misbehavior.

At Marshall, problems were evident early on. The room's first attendant had no real experience working with teenagers.

One day in mid-September 2010, the attendant tells students to follow the rules.

But instead of listening, the two young women repeatedly ask for permission to use the restroom. Two of the young men have their heads laid down on the desk, chewing straws and looking bored. The fifth won't stop teasing one of the girls. She goes from laughing at his jokes to acting annoyed.

Then, one of the boys decides he needs a drink of water and gets up. The attendant tells him to sit down and stands before the front door, but the boy bolts out the back.

Tired and defeated, the attendant picks up his radio and tells the hall security to watch for the boy.

Within two months, the man was fired for mishandling a student.

**CREATING A GOOD** in-school suspension program is a feat. In Brizard's previous position as superintendent of Rochester, N.Y., schools, he assigned a teacher, a counselor and social worker to each room.

There is no such program in Chicago. If a school provides any significant social support, it is often the result of happenstance.

At Mather High School on the North Side, Cosmin Moraru is a history teacher who had just earned his counseling certificate. About the same time, Mather's principal received a grant to implement some programs as alternatives to out-of-school suspension.

The principal decided to keep Moraru on, but assign him to man an in-school suspension room. Moraru developed a protocol, starting with a pre-placement interview with students about their behavior, to make sure they are open to changing it.

On the other three days of the week, Moraru holds in-school

suspension. The day starts with a three-hour group therapy session in which the focus is on modeling behavior and discussing how students can change their reactions to situations. After lunch, the students do their homework.

Moraru limits the number of students in the room to 10. The room has a potted plant, and Moraru plays classical music while students are doing homework.

"We try to make it so this is not so much a negative thing, but an alternative," he says.

After a year of running the room, he boasts some pretty good results. Eighty percent of students who were sent to in-school suspension never returned and were not suspended out-of-school.

**AT MARSHALL**, Principal Kenyatta Stansberry never had the same luck finding a person who felt equipped to run the type of in-school suspension room that might have a positive impact, like the one at Mather. Stansberry also didn't get complete buy-in from teachers for the discipline approach she was trying to implement.

Much of the professional development training conducted in the month before school began centered on how to manage a classroom and build trust with students. Teachers were taught the Boys Town Education Model, which focuses on managing behavior, building relationships and teaching social skills. The method stresses teaching specific life skills, such as looking a teacher in the eye when asked a question, and having teachers learn ways to talk to students to defuse disruptive behavior.

But within a few months of the school year starting, many teachers had abandoned or modified the techniques. By December, math teacher Sofia Orłowski was darting around her classroom giving students stamps for good behavior.

The freshman-level teachers, upset that students they had sent to the dean's office were often not punished, created their own in-school suspension room, called "Think Tank." During periods when they didn't teach classes,

## NO MAGIC BULLET

Last year, 18,600 students—almost 15,000 of them in high schools—spent as least one day in an in-school suspension room. But data show the strategy so far hasn't met the ultimate goal: keeping students from being suspended out of school, a proven risk factor for dropping out.

IN HIGH SCHOOLS...		IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS...	
<b>62%</b>	Have in-school suspension rooms	<b>31%</b>	Have in-school suspension rooms
<b>27%</b>	At schools <b>with</b> in-school suspension, percentage of students given at least one out-of-school suspension.	<b>9%</b>	At schools <b>with</b> in-school suspension, percentage of students given at least one out-of-school suspension.
<b>20%</b>	At schools <b>without</b> in-school suspension, percentage of students given at least one out-of-school suspension.	<b>9%</b>	At schools <b>without</b> in-school suspension, percentage of students given at least one out-of-school suspension.

Note: Analysis includes only those 478 schools that provided data to ISBE. Of the 226 schools that did not have state data, 133 were elementary schools, 69 were charter schools and three were high schools. It is not clear whether these schools did not issue suspensions, or simply did not report them to the state.

Source: *Catalyst Chicago* analysis of Illinois State Board of Education data

9th-grade teachers took turns in the Think Tank, where students were required to write a reflection on their behavior, including a letter home to their parents.

Other teachers didn't see in-school suspension as sufficient punishment. One spring day, Dean Derrick Bass was highly upset that a teacher had emailed Assistant Principal Angel Johnson complaining that a student wasn't sent home for cursing at her.

Bass says he already told this teacher that he could send the boy to in-school suspension or try to arrange for a parent-teacher conference. But the teacher is still not happy.

Bass tells Assistant Principal Matt Curtis that even though it is late in the year, he still has to show some teachers the district's code of student conduct and explain to them the idea of progressive discipline.

"At the end of the day, you can't give a death sentence for stealing a turkey," Bass says. "This issue gives me a headache."

**AFTER THE FIRST** in-school suspension attendant left, Stansberry put a student advocate in the in-school suspension room, with a promise that he would be able to resume his normal duties as soon as she could find a replacement.

About a month and a half later, she replaced the advocate with

Lonnie Felters Jr., a physical education teacher who was still working on obtaining his certification to teach in Illinois.

"He has a good relationship with students," Stansberry says of Felters. "He will be fine."

Felters started out with a good attitude about the position.

But by the end of the year, he was not happy. He had shoved a bookshelf against the backdoor to keep students from escaping. The same kids were in there on a regular basis. Many of them were special education students with behavior problems who, by state law, could not be given more than 10 days of out-of-school suspension.

Most of them refused to do any work and instead spent their day just trying to bother the other students. "One bad apple can ruin it for the whole group," he said.

Felters says he wishes he could limit the number of students sent to in-school suspension or that there were multiple teachers who could work with students one-on-one. He also says he thought a dean should be in the room so that they could threaten out-of-school suspension and it would be a real threat.

"Sometimes I wake up in the morning and dread coming here," he says. "It is that bad."

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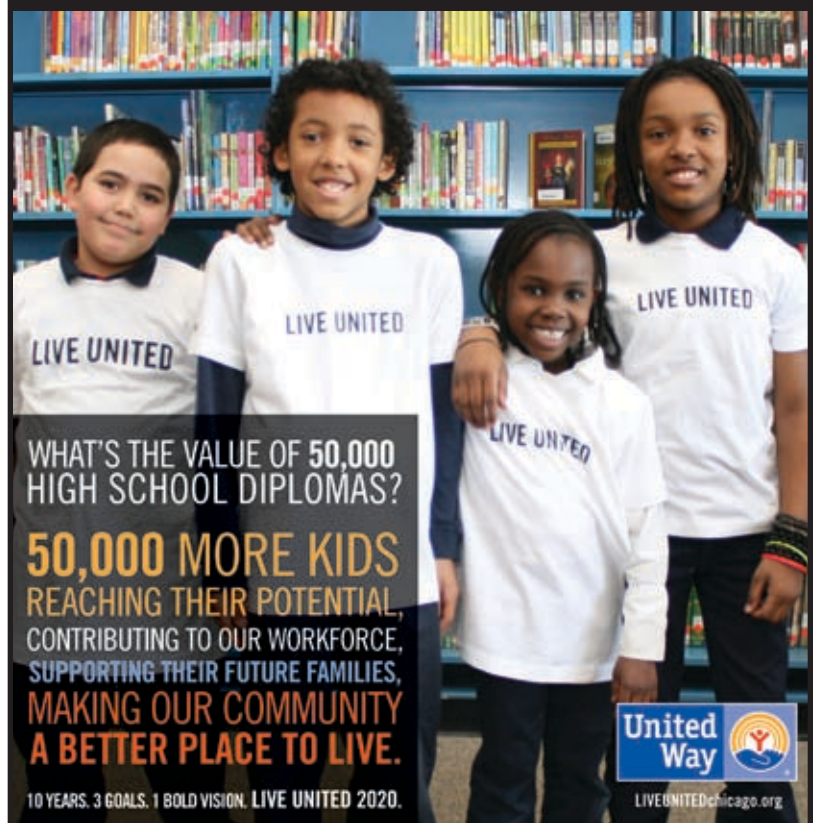
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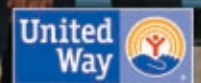
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