

Green Dot Public Schools & Los Angeles Parents Union



THE ENTRY POINT

We've gone from a model school system to a broken school system. So our job is to find a new model that is clearly different and successful and then create demand around the city that all public schools look like that. . . . When teachers, parents, students, and community leaders work together, bold reform can happen.

- Steve Barr, founder and CEO, Green Dot Public Schools

THE CHALLENGE

How does a charter management organization, allied with parent and teacher organizing efforts, navigate Los Angeles's complex political, economic, and social terrain to build effective alliances that will, ultimately, create systemwide reform?

THE PARTNERS

Green Dot Public Schools

Los Angeles Parents Union

Service Employees International Union

The Story

In the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), a district that graduates only half its students, Green Dot has opened twelve *Ánimo* charter high schools to demonstrate a better way for high schools to prepare students for college, leadership, and life. In 2007, *US News & World Report* ranked Green Dot's first school, *Ánimo Leadership*, the thirty-first best high school in America.

Green Dot creates small high schools (with five more opening in the fall of 2008) that hold high expectations for every student. Families are encouraged and expected to participate in the life of the school, and school buildings stay open late for after-school and community activities. The model works. Compared to a 50 percent graduation rate in traditional Los Angeles high schools, Green Dot graduates 80 percent of its students, and two-thirds of last year's graduating class were accepted at four-year colleges.

Green Dot's initial strategic plan called for opening 100 charter high schools like *Ánimo* in neighborhoods across Los Angeles to create a tipping point for systemwide transformation by showing the school district a high school model that works. Three years ago, Green Dot retooled its strategy. Rather than continuing to create individual charter schools, a particularly difficult task in Los Angeles, where real estate is scarce and expensive, Green Dot approached LAUSD to spur systemic change across the system. Give us your failing high schools, Green

Dot urged, and let us transform them into campuses with small schools – each with no more than 500 students – that utilize Green Dot’s school model. As Barr explains, Green Dot’s new mission is “to take research and development from our charter high schools and couple that with political will to create systematic school improvement in Los Angeles.”

With this theory of change, Green Dot offered to take over the struggling Jefferson High School in South Los Angeles. Some 10,000 Los Angeles residents signed petitions and 1,000 parents and community members marched in support of Green Dot’s Jefferson High School Transformation Project. But the district, facing resistance from the teachers union, declined the offer. Instead, to respond to the “parent revolt” for better schools, the district granted Green Dot enough charters to open several small high schools around Jefferson, which attracted more than three-quarters of Jefferson’s incoming ninth-grade class in 2006. While Green Dot’s five Jefferson schools have thrived, Jefferson High School, sadly, remains one of the worst-performing schools in California.

While the Jefferson Transformation Project emerged from a “parent revolt,” Green Dot’s leadership says that its next effort, the Locke High School Transformation Project, was the product of a “teacher revolt.” Wishing to build on the partial success of the Jefferson proposal, Green Dot approached the district again about a potential collaboration after a new superintendent was appointed. Although the superintendent favored the idea, the district bureaucracy was slow to act on the initial momentum.

What began as Green Dot information sessions to help the Locke faculty understand what was happening turned into a full-fledged campaign to solicit their support. Eventually, a majority of teachers within Locke High School voted to turn the school over to Green Dot and their vote was subsequently ratified by the LAUSD school board, which approved the transfer. Planning is under way and Green Dot will restructure the Locke campus into a cluster of autonomous small schools in the fall of 2008.

Green Dot’s vision is strongly aligned with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa’s proposed education reforms and enjoys the support of LAUSD’s current school board, as well as local and national philanthropies, including the Gates and Broad foundations. Since Los Angeles’s public is clamoring for better schools, Green Dot may get the chance to create the systemic school improvement across Los Angeles that its theory of change calls for, based on the model it has developed and refined over its eight years of existence.

Changing the Face of Human Capital

Operating the schools more effectively with less overhead allows more than 90 percent of public funds to go directly to the schools. An innovative teachers union contract gives teachers input into curriculum decisions while granting principals the power to hire and fire teachers. Green Dot calls its principals the “CEOs of their schools,” and the Green Dot Education Team’s goal is to develop the most highly skilled principals and assistant principals in the country.

The Education Team has the same goal for Green Dot’s teachers. Unlike most charter schools, Green Dot created its own reform-minded teachers union, Asociación de Maestros Unidos

(AMU). Green Dot's contract with AMU calls for "a professional workday," in which teachers are required to do whatever is necessary to help students succeed, including playing multiple roles such as advising students and maintaining contact with parents. While Green Dot's teachers do not receive tenure or seniority rights, their pay scale is considerably higher. Last year alone, Green Dot received more than 1,300 applications for 90 teaching positions. Green Dot believes that large-scale educational reform must include a model for how unions and management can effectively work together.

Green Dot and the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) have had a fractious relationship over the years – UTLA leaders will not set foot inside Green Dot schools even as Green Dot and the LAUSD leadership are attempting to increase their collaboration. As A. J. Duffy, the president of UTLA, reflects,

We could have and probably should have organized the Green Dot schools. They started with one charter school, now have ten, and in short order they'll have twenty schools in Los Angeles, with all the teachers paying dues to a different union. And that's a problem.

Many UTLA members are sacrificing their tenure and seniority to teach in Green Dot schools – in effect, voting with their feet, and their jobs, to teach in schools that are, by their estimation, serving students more effectively.

Organizing Parents: The Los Angeles Parents Union

As news of Green Dot's dramatic impact on its students' achievement spread, families and neighborhood-based organizations demanded more Green Dot high schools. As the Green Dot management team tells it, there were three years worth of meetings in which many neighborhood residents and community groups passionately requested a Green Dot charter school.

Green Dot responded to this grassroots demand for change by saying, in effect, it's not that you want a charter school per se, you simply want – and deserve – a high-quality school for the young people in your neighborhoods. Recognizing the need for parents to organize and work collectively to demand high-quality education, Green Dot formed the Los Angeles Parents Union (LAPU), a citywide grassroots organization of parents that pushes educators, administrators, and public officials to improve their schools.

LAPU has grown from its incubation at Green Dot into a separate organization that continues to add neighborhood-based chapters. LAPU's current membership exceeds 4,000 parents in twenty communities – both working-class and middle-class areas – in and around Los Angeles. Membership keeps growing as current members recruit their neighbors and fellow community members to join.

LAPU developed an innovative program called "Parent University" in which parents gain skills to communicate with teachers and administrators to advocate for their children and use organizing tools such as primers on graduation requirements and school-quality scores, among other supports. The effectiveness of Parent University and the sheer number of parents attending serve as examples of the changing face of human capital in Los Angeles education reform,

as parents gain both expertise and a voice to push for positive changes for their children and their communities.

Building Partnerships

Steve Barr noticed that at one of Green Dot's high schools, a large proportion of students had parents who were members of Local 1877 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). From this observation, a partnership evolved between Green Dot and SEIU's national

Many SEIU members are saying to the union, "Thank you for the living wage, health care, and our other hard-fought and important gains, but we didn't come to this country so our kids can push brooms, too. Let's fix the schools!"

– Ryan Smith, executive director,
Los Angeles Parents Union

organization, as well as its Los Angeles affiliate. While most professional unions have opposed charter schools, SEIU has embraced LAPU's reform agenda because their members' children are the main victims of failing urban schools. For almost a year, SEIU has formally worked with Green Dot and LAPU, providing LAPU with both funding and technical assistance from experienced organizers. In turn, SEIU is interested in exploring how Green Dot's model and LAPU's organizing efforts can drive school reform in other urban districts across the country.

Capacity and Scale

Green Dot suspects that there may be a ceiling in terms of the gains in student achievement that can be made in the four years of high school, because the students enter as ninth-graders so woefully underprepared for high school – typically between first- and third-grade reading and math levels. And while students are scoring much higher on state tests than their peers in traditional high schools and graduating on time at impressive rates, Green Dot would like to do more to ensure that its students are well prepared for rigorous coursework at four-year colleges. That probably means intervening earlier in students' academic careers – namely, in middle school. Green Dot has begun exploring the possibility of creating its own middle schools that feed into its high schools, as well as strengthening relationships with other charter management organizations that operate middle schools and share a similar vision.

A member of the Green Dot management team said, "As much as we've grown, we're pretty good at saying no." One opportunity that the Green Dot team could not pass up, however, was the chance to partner with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City to create a Green Dot high school in the South Bronx. When the school opens in the fall of 2008, it will be the first Green Dot school outside of the Los Angeles area. Moreover, the new Bronx school gives Green Dot the chance to partner with an existing teachers union (which has not yet happened in Los Angeles). As New York UFT President Randi Weingarten said in announcing plans for the school,

If you really actually believe in kids and believe in their success, those of us in education, we really shouldn't be in the sandbox fighting with each other. We should be trying to figure out how to work together.

The size and complexities of the high school transformation effort are pushing Green Dot's thinking in new ways and building Green Dot's internal capacity. Focusing on transformations of existing campuses also lightens the burden of acquiring, developing, and financing stand-alone school facilities. Green Dot estimates it could take on one Transformation project each year, but its mission is not about increasing market share or achieving rapid scale. According to Steve Barr,

We don't want our model to scale for the sake of scale alone. We want our model to be a model that can enforce change, that all schools adopt that model. . . . We don't want to be, ten years from now, the only group out there taking over high schools, fighting this fight. We've got to figure out a faster way to get the district to ask us and then to take all our tenets within their model. That's always been the idea.

Discussion Questions

- No charter management organization has attempted a transformation such as the one currently under way at Locke High School. What is at stake locally, and what lessons have been learned about cross-sector partnerships, capacity, and scale from this effort?
- Given the slow progress of collaboration and relationship with the school district, what strategies are being used by Green Dot and LAPU to achieve systemic change within the district?
- What are the complications involved in a charter management organization partnering with a powerful labor union? What are the implications of this partnership for school reform in Los Angeles and elsewhere?
- Unlike many parent-organizing efforts, LAPU organizes parents from both middle-income and working-class neighborhoods. What are the opportunities and tensions that arise from this dynamic, and what is LAPU's long-term vision for building power among parents city-wide?

Site Team Members

Steve Barr is founder and chief executive officer of Green Dot Public Schools. In 2006 the *Los Angeles Times* named Steve one of the 100 most influential people in Southern California. Prior to founding Green Dot, Steve held a number of leadership positions in political and social service organizations, including co-founding Rock the Vote. Currently, Steve serves on the California Board of Education's Advisory Commission on Charter Schools.

Sandy Blazer is chief academic officer of Green Dot Public Schools. Prior to joining Green Dot, Sandy was an elementary, middle school, and high school principal and the Director of General Education and Special Education Services in the Long Beach Unified School District. Sandy implemented models of collaboration that directly impacted the achievement of all groups of students in the schools she has led, all of which have been recognized as California Distinguished Schools.

Ryan Smith is executive director of the Los Angeles Parents Union. Previously, Ryan directed public affairs for Green Dot Public Schools, taught in Mexico, and founded the statewide California Higher Learning Project, which is dedicated to grassroots and social justice advocacy. Ryan has also worked for nonprofits serving youth, the California Democratic Party, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Christine Boardman is president of the Service Employees International Union, Local 73, which represents 25,000 public service employees throughout Illinois and Northwest Indiana. She has visited Los Angeles to study the Green Dot model and LAPU's organizing and has been working with local partners in the Chicago area to implement a similar model there.

For More Information

- Green Dot Public Schools: <www.greendot.org>
- Los Angeles Parents Union: <www.parentsunion.org>
- Service Employees International Union: <www.seiu.org>
- Los Angeles Unified School District: <www.lausd.net>