

Can you change the dynamic in underperforming schools?

Having witnessed children outpace their peers in growth, and meet higher expectations than they had ever known, Cameron Stephenson '92 knows how to describe effective teaching. "I know what I look for in my environment, which is underperforming urban schools," Cameron says. She worked formerly with teachers directly, and now focuses on school leadership, "to help administrators reach a place where they can better support good teachers." Right now Cameron is striving to build results-oriented cultures within two schools in the San Francisco Unified School District.

Cameron works with Partners in School Innovation, a non-profit that partners with individual schools and school districts to change the educational dynamic, to make systemic changes that drive continuous improvement. To schools that implement their program, Partners SI promises significant growth—five or more points, in the California Standards Test in English Language—compared with the average year-to-year growth in California of 2.3 percentage points over the last five years.

Cameron's colleagues build effectiveness among the cadre of teachers and administrators who are already at work in the system. They promote a model of integrated, powerful processes that are straightforward, but easier to explain than to follow.

The model holds literacy as a primary, pivotal set of skills. It relies on a continuous cycle: Teachers agree on clear

instructional (standards-based) priorities; jointly they plan and implement strategies to meet those goals; they assess the degree of success by looking at actual student data; they refine the techniques, implement, test, assess, and refine—again and again.

For those who sustain the focus, the gains are profound, shifting everyone's sense of competence, success and collegiality. "When teachers are actively learning about their practice, when they collaborate, they love it," Cameron says. "I've even seen veteran teachers value the advice of younger teachers, who are more often trained in this kind of teaching."



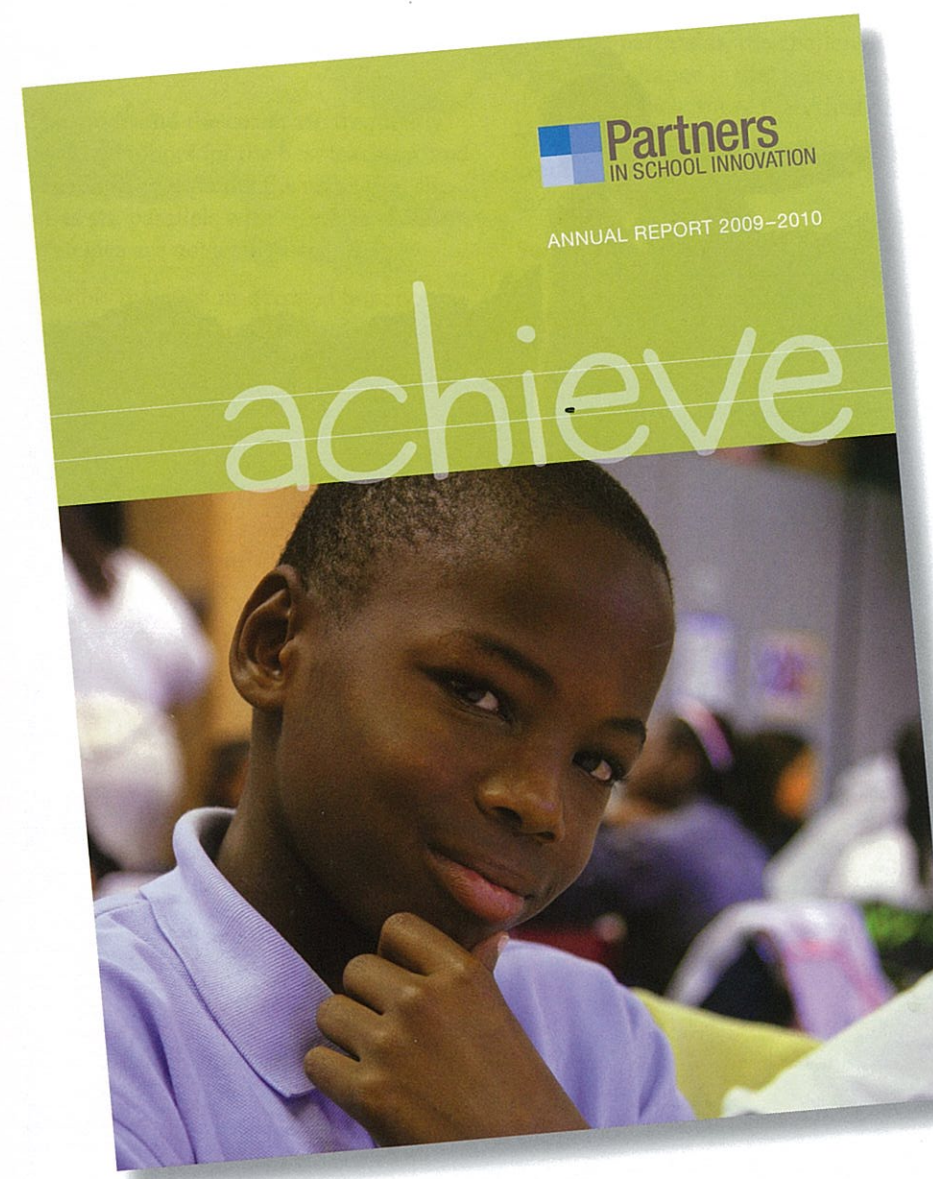
Plenty of cultural forces and old habits resist these changes, however. Teachers are used to teaching "program," rather than standards. Achieving competence in standards can be demonstrated in data, but looking at data is a new orientation and skill. Holding common conversation, observing one another—physically and through data, surrendering some autonomy: these changes take courage and time.

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In fact, on Cameron's concise list of attributes, holding high expectations, "a true belief that all children can achieve," is the most important. In Cameron's experience, a short but compelling complex of qualities can distinguish the most successful teachers:

- Focusing on results: looking at your practice, being reflective and solution-oriented.
- Having "presence": managing the classroom. You can develop that presence, over time; you have to be willing to hold the line.
- Knowing how to differentiate: trying to meet individual needs and attributes; never giving up; coming back to the drawing board again and again.
- Being clear about what you want and expect: You know the exemplar. You know where you're going. Children shouldn't have to figure that out. Learning doesn't have to be a puzzle.

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- Loving children, and loving what you do.
- Being driven by the conviction that every child should have quality education.

Our challenge to change educational outcomes is not simply about education, Cameron notes, it's about social justice. "I know that with the right structure and support, all students, regardless of their race or economic background, can go to college. I have seen what's good for my students at KIPP (the nationally replicated Knowledge Is Power Program where Cameron was a founding administrator); I know the students in the schools I work with now can go to college, too. But without this kind of focus and reform, there's little chance they will be prepared."

Cameron's teaching career began as an elementary teacher in Los Angeles with Teach For America. She then served as a founding staff member of the East Palo Charter School, where she taught fourth grade, served as the Title I coordinator, and managed the after school program. In 2002, Cameron helped to start the first KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) school in the Bay Area, where she worked for seven years, primarily as the assistant principal. Cameron earned her bachelor's in political science from Stanford University and her M.B.A. and M.S.W. from the University of Michigan. She also completed the New Leaders for New Schools program in 2003-2004 and earned her Clear Administrative Credential.

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