

Turning around Wilson Charter School



October 31, 2016

Two weeks ago, our Co-CEO, Michael Stone, [wrote about the positive effects of closures and restarts](#). We asked Jamar Mckneely, CEO of InspireNOLA, to share his perspective on the challenges and opportunities of charter school restarts in New Orleans. Last year, InspireNOLA took over Andrew Wilson Charter School, an “F” rated school. After the first year under InspireNOLA, Wilson had the highest gains in the city in reading and the second highest gains in math.

“To turn around a school, change the student culture and academic expectations”

By Jamar Mckneely, CEO InspireNOLA

When I was growing up, my biggest obstacle to academic success was my self-esteem, which held me back from trying hard in school. Although my parents taught me about the impact of a good education, I didn't believe I could do well, so I never put in the effort I needed to excel. It wasn't until my senior year in high school that that I started listening to my parents and mentors, who encouraged me to pursue my goals and live up to my potential.

That's why when [InspireNOLA](#) took over Andrew H. Wilson in 2015, our goal was to create an environment where both the culture and structure would bring out the best in our students. We had experience taking two other charter schools- Alice Harte and Edna Karr- from a "D" academic rating to an "A," and we were excited about working in a turnaround environment to support a similar transformation at Wilson.

InspireNOLA started by recruiting teachers and administrators who shared our vision of student excellence, and were willing to use data from our quarterly benchmark assessments to drive instruction and curriculum in the classroom.

Before the school year started, we brought our new teachers and staff together for a two-week training that would create a shared understanding of how to shift the school from a failing environment to one where kids would thrive. This required immersing teachers in 'big picture' areas such as instructional design and student assessment, along with tactical strategies for how students would transition in and out of classrooms and through the halls.

Student success requires a partnership between teachers and families, so we also invited Wilson parents to come to school for their own training about how to support learning at home. Recognizing that it's not always easy to get to school in the evening, we brought in food and offered parents special

incentives if they participated in our family learning events.

Of course students are the most important part of any turnaround effort, and that's why we designed a staggered start to our school year that acclimated the children to the new culture and expectations at Wilson.

The most surprising part? The kids got it right away. In fact, they adjusted so quickly that we had to rethink our implementation timeline. Rather than spending the first few months of school focusing on behavior and climate, we were able to shift our focus to academic learning almost immediately.

As we changed the culture from failure to high expectations and positive support, the students began to rise. After just one year under InspireNOLA's management, Wilson made the [highest academic gain in New Orleans on LEAP tests in English language and the second highest gain in math.](#)

But our results are not just about test scores; we're also investing in the social emotional development of the students at Wilson and all of our InspireNOLA schools. We have an advisory period where students learn specific strategies for how to deal with difficult situations, we bring in "wrap around" services in mental health, and we've recruited mentors from the community who provide the children with a vision of possibility beyond their neighborhoods.

InspireNOLA recently hosted a "[Rally for Excellence](#)," where over 3,500 students from 25 schools across New Orleans came together to celebrate learning. The event featured a talk from Sybrina Fulton, whose son Trayvon Martin was killed in Florida in 2012. Her talk made it clear that even in times of chaos, kids can still accomplish their dreams if they get the love and support they need.

That's why parents are so positive about the changes at Wilson. Rather than closing the school and scattering the kids, a turnaround has offered families a

chance to see what can be different with new leadership, culture and norms.

In our second year of running Wilson, InspireNOLA is learning about how we can continue to help children deepen their engagement in the classroom. We're excited about the progress we've made so far, but the school has not yet reached an "A" rating, so we know there is more we can do to support all children to achieve.

One of my favorite quotes is from Frederick Douglas, who said, "It's easier to raise strong children than to fix broken men." At [Wilson and all of our InspireNOLA schools](#), we are investing in children now so they can be the strong men and women of tomorrow.