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Real progress on improved schools

Efforts to help students are paying dividends

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By Eric J. Cooper

Aliana, a special education student at Bridgeport's Blackham Middle School, is a testament to the power of self-confidence. She received the maximum score of 5 on the reading portion of the Connecticut Mastery Test last year and a 4 on the math section -- an incredible achievement for a student who had arrived in Bridgeport just three years earlier, unable to read. She credits her teacher and the organizational skills and commitment of her school's principal. As Aliana, who used to spend time in a self-contained classroom, now says: "I do not have to be the one aside, not doing anything."

There are plenty of Alianas in Bridgeport's schools: creative, intelligent, eager learners, expecting to excel but stuck on the sidelines. Their chances cannot be left to the whim of fate -- the luck of finding one building and one teacher able to move mountains for them.

But the Bridgeport Public Schools system is committed to reversing the educational inequities spawned by poverty, immigration and racism, that keep students like Aliana in the shadows. There finally is evidence that the schools are helping to make Aliana's "luck" more commonplace.

For four years, 17 of the district's schools have attempted the impossible. They have dared to initiate school system reform one student, one classroom, and one building at a time. These schools, the lowest performers in the district, have partnered with the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education

to write a new school success story, with students, teachers and administrators fearlessly learning, teaching and leading.

The efforts are paying off. A recent analysis of CMT performance in reading and mathematics in six partner schools that are closely following the NUA program demonstrates considerable growth over time in six of the six schools. More significant, this growth is comparable to or greater than the growth of similar populations across the state. Particularly noteworthy is the performance of Beardsley School, one of the first Connecticut schools identified as in need of improvement under the No Child Left Behind act. Math scores of Connecticut students have increased an average of 89 points since 2006. Districtwide, that growth was 87 points. Beardsley grew 111 points, as did another partner school, Longfellow. On average in reading and math, the 17 schools continue the upward achievement trending after several years of disappointing data.

Many factors beyond the NUA partnership contributed to this success, including the efforts of community

stakeholders. And more, obviously, needs to be done. Strides are being made, but achievement levels are not where they need to be, nor where we expect them to be in the near future.

Improving student performance is not without its challenges. Chief among them for the sweeping improvement we all desire are chronic underfunding, inability to go to scale because of the lack of resources, and a steady siphoning off to the suburbs of teachers who have benefited from the renewed sense of their own pedagogical power -- a confidence cultivated in the professional development activities that make up the bulk of the NUAs work in the district. There are isolated islands of success: a classroom here, a building there, and on average an upward trend in data improvement throughout the district.

This is not the stuff of whole system reform. Whole system reform requires more than just the will to leave no child behind. It demands the commitment of the larger community. It starts when that community cares enough to recognize, understand and support the acts of educational heroism that occur everyday. It is sustained when the public inside and outside the schools finds ways to coordinate and work together on common goals.

Heroic educators believe that when the nation talks about leaving no child behind, that means theirs, too. These educators recognize the high potential of their students. Their expectations for their students are high regardless of family circumstances, and they have the strategic pedagogical skills to support students to meet their unyielding expectations for intellectual rigor and academic precision. These educators get up every morning with the belief that they can dramatically alter the life trajectories of their students. With the help of the entire community, continued support for the programs and efforts led by Supt. of Schools John Ramos and the Board of Education, it can be done.

Eric J. Cooper, of Stamford, is president of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education.

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