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GREEN DOT PUBLIC SCHOOLS
LOS ANGELES

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
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**UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS
HEARING ON
“ESEA REAUTHORIZATION: SCHOOL TURNAROUND”**

Introduction

Thank you Chairman Harkin, Senator Enzi, and all the Members of the Health, Education, and Labor Committee for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of Green Dot Public Schools. It is my hope that our efforts to effectively turn around Locke High School and the strategies we used to do so can be replicated to help improve schools across the country. We share the Committee’s goal to provide quality education for every child. We need a world-class education system to meet the demands of a global economy. As Members of this Committee, you have a tremendous challenge and an amazing opportunity to transform the nation’s education system through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary School Act. I am grateful for the opportunity to share our experience to date and the challenges and opportunities we see ahead.

Green Dot Charter Schools

Thirty years ago, California schools and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) in particular, were considered models of Kindergarten through University education. Since then, California has dropped to 46th nationally in per pupil funding and LAUSD has one of the highest dropout rates in the country. Faced with the unacceptable prospect of losing another generation of students to illiteracy, delinquency, and a life of poverty, Green Dot Public Schools was created to help reform and transform LAUSD schools. It has been a daunting task, but ten years of experience and some compelling data have proven that positive transformation is possible.

Green Dot opened its first school in the fall of 2000 with 140 students. The organization has since grown to serve over 8,300 students in the most impoverished areas of Los Angeles. Prior to Locke, Green Dot operated ten schools in Los Angeles. These schools consistently outperform neighboring public schools. For example, on California state tests Green Dot’s average scores are over 130 points higher than other public schools in the same district. In Green Dot schools: 80% of entering ninth-grade students graduate within four years; 76% of graduating seniors have been admitted to four-year universities; and nearly all other graduates attend two-year colleges or enter the military. In Green Dot schools graduation rates for students receiving a College Preparatory High School diploma¹¹. We achieve this while serving a 99% minority population. In contrast, LAUSD’s graduation rate is 12% overall and drops to 8-9% for African Americans and Latinos. Our core mission is to graduate students and prepare them for college, leadership, and life.

1 California students can graduate with two types of High School Degrees: the “traditional” High School Diploma and the A-G High School Diploma, which allows students to apply for admission into the UC/CSU system. This second degree is much more rigorous and it is the minimum standard that high schools should be offering for college preparedness. All Green Dot Schools only offer the A-G diploma.

GREEN DOT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

LOS ANGELES

Green Dot was not founded to replace the public school system, but to catalyze school reform. Our vision is to prove there is a more effective way to provide public education to young adults in the Los Angeles area and achieve real results. Running small successful charter schools in which low income, high risk youth succeed not only provides quality education for students, but influences LAUSD and other school districts in the area to adopt more effective school governing and academic strategies.

The Locke High School Turnaround

The Alain Leroy Locke Senior High School was created as a response to the Watts riots of 1967 to provide students in South Los Angeles and the Watts community a safe and secure place to learn. Forty years later Locke High School earned the unenviable distinction as one of the worst performing schools in California. The school serves a 99% minority student population with 95% qualifying for free and reduced lunch¹. Before the Green Dot takeover no students was offered a quality education. Here are some of Locke's statistics prior to the transformation:

- In 2004-2005, nearly 40% of Locke's teachers were under-credentialed
- 90% of Locke's students performed below basic, or far below basic, on California Standards Tests in both mathematics and English language arts
- 57% of students failed Algebra 1A
- Fewer than one-third of students passed the California High School Exit Exam, required for high school graduation
- In 2007, graduation rates were only 28%

With more students on the streets than in the classroom, the school culture had become one of violence and chaos. In May of 2008, nearby street violence led to riots inside of Locke, which had to be quelled by the police.

In early 2007, teachers took matters into their own hands. Teachers who had left Locke to work in new flagship Green Dot Schools joined hands with the remaining Locke teachers and the Watt community to petition LAUSD for a change in school management. In July 2008, all 2700 students at Locke began to be served by the Green Dot organization.

Known as the Locke Transformation Project, this radical restructuring was made possible through a one-of-a-kind partnership between a non-profit charter operator (Green Dot), the stakeholders of a public high school (teachers, parents, community leaders), and a school district (LAUSD). Unlike previous charter schools run by Green Dot where enrollment is controlled and students and parents sign up to enroll from across the district, at Locke High School Green Dot took responsibility for every student within the existing attendance boundary.

Before the school could reopen in the fall of 2008, Green Dot identified over 150 issues that needed to be addressed to ensure minimum operating standards. These issues ranged from hiring effective school leaders and teachers to addressing the needs of the students returning from juvenile correctional facilities. Decisions as basic as uniform colors and as complicated as gang intervention strategies all had to be made before the doors opened on July 8th for the first day of summer school.

Over the last two years Green Dot has made great progress transforming Locke High School by:

- Implementing a new governance structure focused on small personalized academies
- Creating a culture of excellent education with high expectations for student success

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- Training and supporting highly effective teachers and leaders
- Providing a safe and respectful learning environment for students and staff

A New School Structure and Governance

Based on Green Dot's principle of small, personalized schools, Locke re-opened in the fall of 2008 as the new Locke Family of High Schools, restructured into eight small academies. Each academy has its own principal, its own set of classrooms with clear boundaries, and its own County-District-School (CDS) code for individual school accountability. All academies are college-focused; students are required to take the thirteen courses necessary for admission to California State Universities, known as A-G classes. College readiness is a basic tenet of all Green Dot schools and Locke is no exception.

To meet the needs of diverse learners, some of Green Dot's academies have additional interventions. The goal is for the smaller academies to meet the individual needs of all students in the larger community. For instance, there are specific academy programs for English Language Learners and students with special needs. Other academies pair college preparation with career technical education. The ACE Academy in particular is an example of one innovative school model within the Locke Family of High Schools that provides students with an opportunity to explore pathways in architecture, construction and engineering integrated with an A-G college preparatory curriculum.

The original Green Dot charter school model uses an incubation period to phase in new students. Every year, each academy takes on a new 9th grade class of 150 students. This model continues until they establish a full 9th-12th grade academy with approximately 500-600 students. Since Locke was already an established school with 2,700 students, Green Dot created two transition academies, known as Locke Launch to College Academies (LLCA's), for the existing 10-12th grade students. Green Dot then created five small academies using the original incubation model for all incoming 9th grade students. The LLCAs have been a challenge as teachers have had to work hard to incorporate older students into the curriculum, make up for years lost, and break entrenched habits. Green Dot has seen the most dramatic impact from the students who attended Locke before the transition. Our initial results are positive, particularly in terms of attendance and disciplinary issues. Under Green Dot, Locke's average daily attendance rose from 77.8% to 89.3%. Additionally, 85% of parents surveyed said Green Dot provided a safe environment and offered better access to education than LAUSD.

A Culture of Excellent Education

Green Dot emphasizes differentiated, personalized learning based on student growth and specific benchmarks for achievement. Frequent and multiple student assessments measure growth and inform instruction. Through these assessments, teachers offer differentiated instruction to ensure all students are achieving academically. Also, Green Dot's curriculum skills course focuses on study skills development at each grade level:

- 9th Grade Curriculum Skills: The curriculum is focused on the individual as a student learner and community participant. Students are taught study skill strategies, test taking strategies, and communication tools to enable them to succeed academically.
- 10th Grade Curriculum Skills: The curriculum is focused on adequately preparing students for the California High School Exit Exam. Students work with content teachers, use an online component and receive continual feedback on areas of strengths and weaknesses.

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- 11th & 12th Grade Curriculum Skills: There are three pathways for 11th graders designed to accommodate students that are on track to graduate, students who still need to pass the California exit exam (CAHSEE) and students who need intensive credit recovery assistance.

Green Dot uses data from state assessments, diagnostic assessments, e.g., Read180, Math Diagnostic, and classroom assessments on an ongoing basis to inform instruction and student placement. Given that the majority of students entering Locke are reading at the third grade level, specific student interventions (such as Read 180 and Math Diagnostic) are necessarily built into the school day. The staff analyzes student achievement data to determine the areas of highest need and to develop specific goals and steps necessary to increase individual student achievement. Each department sets goals at the beginning of the year and determines specific steps that will be taken to achieve agreed upon goals. For example, after reviewing state test data, the math department may set a goal to increase the number of students in the “Advanced” category in Algebra by 16%. The department then establishes the necessary steps each teacher will need to take in order to reach the goal. The department is responsible for determining resource allocation for each goal. Green Dot has also launched a comprehensive effort to improve writing skills, as writing is a fundamental skill needed for college success.

Student grades are reviewed each quarter to ensure that assessments are determined appropriately based on student growth and individual student needs. Assessments are designed, reviewed, and evaluated based on their accuracy in monitoring student growth. Tests are not intended as punitive measures for students but rather as guidelines for improvement.

In the first year, even with a 38% increase of students tested, Green Dot has been able to maintain a consistent percentage of students achieving proficiency in English and Math. Already, first year students interviewed about the changes in Locke High School stated, “The teachers care a lot more...they ask you things, like whether you’re OK, and do you understand what they taught.”² “Teachers do not ask if we are going to college; they ask us which college we will be attending.”³ 70% of students surveyed noted positive impressions of Locke’s discipline policy, school spirit, and access to an adult when in need of assistance. In 2007-2008, Locke reported 924 suspensions. Under Green Dot management this number shrank by 50%.

Effective Teachers and School Leaders

To achieve its ultimate goal of dramatically raising student achievement, Green Dot is focused on ensuring students at Locke have access to highly effective teachers and school leaders.

Green Dot’s “Administrator in Residence Program” is a cornerstone of its effort to recruit, train, and induct effective leaders. The program provides ongoing support for the aspiring leaders as they develop their philosophy of education, leadership, and other key foundational elements prior to the opening of a school. The program inducts and trains future principals and assistant principals in six key areas:

- Green Dot philosophy, core values, and education model
- Building Culture

² LA Times Editorial Staff, “Locke High School’s Progress,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 2008.

³ Comment from student stakeholder feedback.

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- Instructional Leadership
- People and Resource Management
- Community Leadership
- Problem Solving

The principal training program is a one-year fellowship program rotating through Green Dot's highest performing schools. Over half of Locke's new principals were identified through the residency program.

A critical component of academic success is ensuring that our teachers are well prepared. Therefore, job-embedded professional development for teachers and school site leaders is a critical component of Green Dot's school model and program. Green Dot believes strongly in reflective practice, which occurs in an environment where there is collaboration, use of meaningful data, and thoughtful discussion regarding instruction. Each teacher receives 144 hours of professional development per year. Some specific activities include:

- Peer Observation: Periodic observations of a colleague to observe and debrief on best practices in the classroom.
- PD Days: Ten full days of professional development for school staff to plan for the year, reflect on best practices, and analyze data.
- Weekly staff development: A late start is provided one day each week in order to establish a 90-minute professional development period.
- Intensive Teacher Support and Observations: New and struggling teachers are pulled out of class every other month or as needed for one on one reflection and planning sessions (with administrator and or department chairs) to address their individual staff development needs. They are observed by their department chairs and provided with peer support in monthly department meetings.

Implicit in our teacher professional development efforts is a core element of the Green Dot mission: all staff must be dedicated and fully committed to providing the best education possible for all students. For this reason, Green Dot required all former Locke staff to reapply for their jobs with renewed commitment to the classrooms and a dedication to high-quality, rigorous instruction. Nearly a third of the original Locke teachers were rehired under Green Dot's management. Refuting the notion that bold human capital initiatives cannot be accomplished within the collective bargaining framework, Green Dot's teachers are all union certified.

Safe School Environment for Students and Staff

In perhaps the biggest push to raise attendance rates, increase student participation, and lower the dropout rate, Green Dot has implemented an extensive effort to change the culture of Locke High School. This effort has included several specific strategies including: a significant investment in safety and conflict management practices; extended school hours; and parental involvement and wraparound services.

Green Dot invested aggressively in improving safety in a school that was overrun by gang problems. There are numerous individuals dedicated to very visibly monitor the school at different times during the day to make sure that students feel the school is safe and not open to external influences. Some areas of the campus have been fenced in to increase security and Green Dot has developed a series of techniques to create "safe passage" to and from school. There are

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GREEN DOT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

LOS ANGELES

bus services to protect students traversing gang territory and there are security and parent volunteers posted around a 2-block perimeter from the campus. These measures have helped to eliminate fights, reduce graffiti and other forms of vandalism.

Green Dot has also put in place a comprehensive “Safe and Civil” program to help build conflict management skills for incoming freshman students, as well as for existing students. The main program starts during the summer “bridge session” to transition students from their 8th grade schools into the 9th grade Locke Academies. The program includes strategies to:

- Develop better behavior management strategies
- Learn effective classroom management procedures
- Implement school wide Positive Behavior Support and Response-to-Intervention for Behavior

The goal of this program and others at Locke is to instill respect and responsibility in the students and for staff to improve school climate and school culture. All our staff, including non-teaching personnel, is trained to address students respectfully and on how to de-escalate potentially volatile situations. We strive to turn any issue into a “teachable moment”.

Green Dot school facilities are kept open until at least 5:00p.m. daily to provide students with safe, enriching after school programs and to allow community groups offering quality services to use the facilities. Keeping schools open later accommodates the schedules of working families. Allowing community groups to use school facilities helps ensure that the local neighborhood takes ownership and responsibility for the school.

At Locke, the Watts Willowbrook Boys & Girls Club and the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) are the service providers for the afterschool programs. Students who are not achieving a satisfactory grade within a particular class or who need more support in a subject can attend tutoring, which is offered for an hour every day after school and run by a credentialed teacher. Academic programs such as SAT preparation, academic focused groups such as calculus and algebra clubs are also available afterschool.

Green Dot is committed to actively integrating parents/guardians into all aspects of their students’ education experiences. At all Green Dot schools parents are required to give at least 35 hours of service annually. A wide variety of service opportunities are available including, attending PTA meetings, volunteering to provide safe passage, taking students to museums or participating in cultural events. Education programs are provided to new parents to help them learn the best ways to support their children’s educations. Research has proven that increased parental involvement can directly affect student achievement and we believe engaging parents is key to creating a safe and healthy learning environment for everyone.

Next year Green Dot plans to open a community health and wellness center in the neighborhood. The Locke Wellness Center will address students and parent’s emotional and social needs. Specifically, the Center will provide health and vision screenings, mental health services, parenting classes, and exercise classes as needed.

While there is still a long way to go to improve the neighborhood as whole, a protected healthy learning environment is the first step to reducing violence in the community and raising student

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achievement at the school. Some of early indications of success include:

- Green Dot retained approximately 500 more students than LAUSD had the previous year (2008) at Locke⁴;
- Attendance increased by 12%;
- Parent and student surveys indicate that stakeholders feel safer and more supported;
- Suspensions involving drugs or violence have shrunk from 21% of all suspensions to only 5%; and
- Graduation rate rose by 15 percentage points.

Recommendations to Congress

To conclude, Green Dot's efforts to turn around Locke High School have been and will continue to be successful because we learn from our environment, hone our practices, and focus on the specific needs of our students and community.

We hope that Green Dot's experience at Locke High School will be instructive to educators and policymakers striving to turn around low-performing schools. To this end, we recommend Congress reauthorize ESEA to:

- Provide local flexibility for school administrators to restructure failing schools to more effectively meet the needs of the community. This must include authority to use and implement the four elements of reform that Green Dot implemented in Locke High School (new school governance, personalized instruction, effective teachers and leaders, safe and healthy schools).
- Increase the level of student supports, including academic and nonacademic supports that meet the comprehensive needs of struggling students and accelerate the learning and achievement of all students. This may include wraparound health and wellness services and afterschool programs.
- Provide resources for appropriate, scientifically valid instructional interventions or other academic support services, specifically for reading and math. This may include extended learning time for struggling students.
- Incentivize strategies aligning academic standards, curricula, and assessments with college-readiness requirements.
- Provide funding for high-quality teacher and leader residency programs to recruit and train highly effective teachers and leaders.
- Provide high-quality job-embedded professional development for teachers and leaders. This must include built-in time to share best practices and evaluate peer performance.

Green Dot's core value is an unwavering belief in all students potential. Evidenced by our early results at Locke, students will strive to meet the expectations of their teachers and mentors—if given the chance. Although Locke still faces significant challenges, we are confident that Green Dot has already begun to transform the lives of our Locke students and the community we serve.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

⁴ Data obtained by comparing number of active students in LAUSD's student information system in 07-08 and Green Dot's student information system in 08-09.