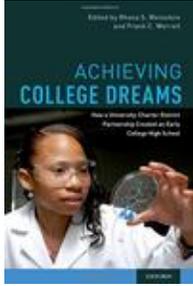


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## Making Dreams a Reality

A review of

### **Achieving College Dreams: How a University-Charter District Partnership Created an Early College High School**

by Rhona S. Weinstein and Frank C. Worrell (Eds.)

New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016. 419 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-026090-3. \$69.95

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Demographers say the future of the United States will be in the hands of burgeoning populations of African Americans and Latinos, the same population that is not being well served in today's K–12 education system. All of us will need to rely on these young people to become skilled in medicine, science, engineering, teaching, nursing, and all the other professions that support us and drive our economy. Colleges—and particularly our nation's great research universities—need these students to fill their classrooms of the future and to come into college with critical foundational skills. As documented here, 50% of California's school-age population is Latino and less than 10% of them could even qualify to apply to UC – Berkeley (p.38).

*Achieving College Dreams* tells a fascinating and complex story of one attempt to address the problems of underachieving youth by building a new school. The partners were the University of California – Berkeley and the Aspire Charter Schools, with funding from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. They call the school CAL Prep.

However, this is not just the story of a single small pilot school or the university "lab school" of old, which primarily served children of faculty and staff on campus. This was and is an ambitious project that looks seriously at the nexus of secondary education, teacher education, university research on schools and curriculum, and the divide between universities and secondary education. The further these participants delved into the problems of underachieving high school students, the more they learned about the need for far more supports for students than just books and enthusiastic, motivated teachers. As one of the school's graduates expressed it in a poem, these students find themselves "inside the same crater of failure" and are thankful for the "gun shots that missed us" (p.xiii). Could a project partnership bring about a new way of educating students who lived with trauma and poverty to help them reach a very high level of academic performance, with a curriculum similar to an elite independent school? Could the students make it in such an environment? Finally, could these educators learn about how to build one and perhaps replicate other new schools that accomplish this high level of learning? The Gates Foundation had established a network of small early college high schools, and the Aspire Charter schools had experience with starting schools, so there were some road maps; but each partnership is unique in its setting, participants, and challenges.

A mantra in public education today is that *all students can learn*. The creators of CAL Prep took this to heart in the partnership's "co-construction" of a *nonselective, early college, regional school* dedicated to move the underserved of the Oakland area upward into the best four-year colleges. They faced many controversies during the design phase, including issues of tracking and de-tracking, charter schools vs. traditional schools, an accommodative curriculum, and acceleration and remediation in the same school framework. The implementation phase would bring many new hurdles.

This book was particularly interesting to me because I have worked in partnerships between urban school districts and university colleges of education. During the 1990's, I also served on the national board of the Holmes Partnership, a group of research universities and school partners that worked tirelessly to bring together the universities and public education to the benefit of both, to improve teacher education, and to address inequality in the professoriate (The Holmes Group, 2006). Appreciating how difficult these types of authentic partnerships are to create and sustain, and

how sometimes the work falls to those in the lower ranks, my first task upon receiving the book to review was to analyze the list of contributors. Who really was involved? What were the roles of the Graduate School of Education and the Dean's office? Was the project, and therefore this edited volume, driven mainly by the university faculty, as is often the case in school–university partnerships? It was reassuring to see that in this instance the partnership and the book reflect a real collaboration in the narratives of multiple authors of the various chapters and the credit that is given frequently to the many individuals, committees, and task forces that truly drove this partnership over a 10-year period. The fact that the partnership has lasted this long and continues is another indication that the CAL/UC-Berkeley/Aspire partnership has done a lot of things right in building trust and sharing responsibilities across disparate cultures for this outstanding effort.

Skeptical though I was at the beginning, the Partnership has impressive results to show. Of the first cohort of students, all were accepted and graduated from four-year colleges. CAL Prep has successfully graduated five cohorts of students, beginning in 2005, starting with ~90 sixth and seventh graders. The current school is primarily a high school of 9th–12th graders, but the research has revealed that the school failures of urban youth rarely begin in high school and there is a critical need for more attention to literacy in earlier grades.

There should be a large audience for this edited volume including university faculty and administrators, educators in the schools, and (I hope) philanthropists that are directing resources toward closing the achievement gap. It surprised me to read how difficult it was for CAL Prep to find a suitable building for their innovative school, given the tremendous influence of an institution such as UC Berkeley. In fact, the desired building did not happen until 2015 although perhaps the struggle carried out at their first school site (a former elementary school) may have helped to create the camaraderie that the Partnership needed to survive the tensions and challenges year after year. This book provides a rich case study with detailed descriptions of key design features and their strategies. Some of those strategies worked and some did not, as their philosophy was tested and their approach evolved. Struggles and tensions certainly are evident, and realistic stories are told here about teachers, principals, faculty, and other staff and volunteers who left the project. Student attrition, cultural conflicts within the neighborhood, and the school's recruitment outreach were also continuing problems. A groundwork of structures for decision-making was created during the first two years of planning, yet the day-to-day implementation of running a school severely tested the viability and flexibility of these organizational structures.

The school faced all the risks and challenges of any urban school, including violence and disruptive student behavior. The book gives hope, however, that a well thought-out approach to the *whole student* and a long-term commitment from institutions, educators, and funders can make a powerful difference in what too many see as an intractable problem in American education.

## Reference

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The Holmes Group. (2006). *The Holmes trilogy: Tomorrow's schools, Tomorrow's teachers, and Tomorrow's schools of education*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

