

## Remembering the Titans: The Politics of School Reform at T.C. Williams High School

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By

Timeka Smith and Amanda Cleveland<sup>1</sup>

### ***Abstract***

*In the spring of 2010, T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria Virginia began a comprehensive school reform process toward bolstering the school's "persistently lowest achieving" status. This case study highlights the political implications of the school reform selection process, especially for minority students. As such, we track the recent reform agenda to a series of decisions made in 1996-97 aimed at coping with the school's consistently lowest-performing population which led to an explosion of media attention around the issue of "forced re-segregation". Although research points to implementation failure at the street-level, within classrooms and among teachers, this case suggests that politicization of the process at the district level drove reform outcomes for T.C. Williams in 1997 and has shaped the decision to adopt a "transformation" model in 2010. This case study seeks to build on extant scholarship which attributes policy outcomes to the role of advocacy coalitions, the legitimacy key policy stakeholders, and the social construction of target populations. The case follows a exploratory approach relying on analysis of school board meetings, public comments, and direct interviews with the former Principle of T.C. Williams, the Chair of the alternative education task force, President of the NAACP NOVA Chapter, and the current Superintendent of Schools.*

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## Introduction

On March 3rd, 2010 T. C. Williams High School in Alexandria Virginia began a comprehensive school reform process toward bolstering the school's "persistently lowest achieving" (PLA) designation.<sup>2</sup> Despite over five decades of internally directed efforts on behalf of Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) and local community-based advocacy groups to bridge the performance gap for underrepresented student populations, the school ranked in the lowest 5% among Virginia's 128 Title I eligible schools.

Virginia State Department of Education (VDOE) made the PLA designation based on scores from four specific Standards of Learning (SOL) exams: English 11, Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry across "all student" groups. The new distinction made T.C., and several other Virginia schools, eligible for part of \$3.5 billion appropriated under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, School Improvement Grants program.

Despite the prospect for much needed additional funding, the PLA designation triggered community outcry and sparked national media attention. Parents of high-performing students were shocked that the school received the label, having seen its success in placing students in the best colleges across the nation. Over the next three months, Superintendent Morton Sherman managed the reform selection process in a heightened politicized environment. This case study highlights the political implications of the school reform selection process at T.C. Williams, as a potential national model. As such, we track the 2010 reform agenda to a long history of Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS)

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<sup>2</sup>"Persistently lowest-achieving" schools are defined as "Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring, that are among the lowest-achieving five percent of title I schools...based on the academic achievement of 'all students' in reading/language arts and mathematics combined and the school has not reduced its failure rate in reading/language arts and/or mathematics by 10 to 15 percent each year for the past two years."

alternative education programs aimed at coping with the school's consistently low-performing population.

## **Background**

T.C. Williams High School, well known for its role in the movie "Remember the Titans", has a long history of using national and state-wide reform agendas to marginalize its worst-off students, commonly African American and Hispanic populations. Much of this history is rooted in the school's fragmented alternative education system, dating back to the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1971, a federal city-wide desegregation order prompted the consolidation of Alexandria's three high school campuses into a single location at T.C. Williams. That year, T.C.'s integrated football team won a state championship, becoming a national model for successful racial integration. However, like many public school campuses across the nation, integration came with problems related to managing large pools of underperforming students. Rather than work toward equalizing educational outcomes, Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) administrators recognized a ready solution in the alternative education framework. Students in these programs would be removed entirely from their home school to be housed in an "alternative" setting. Geographically, ACPS was able to disperse at-risk populations across its several campuses, which amounted to a de-facto segregated student body.

In early 1960, ACPS obtained grants through a federal Vocational Rehabilitation Program to establish Prince Street School, which provided a comprehensive alternative education program for special education students across the districts K-12 population. However, due to changes in federal law related to students with disabilities, and a funding

drought for vocational rehabilitation, most programs were dismantled in the early 1970s. Attempts were made to re-integrate special education students into normal classroom settings. However, ACPS, like many other districts, faced public pressure to remove at-risk students with the worst behavioral issues. Public Law 94-142, Education of All Handicapped Children Act mandated a free and appropriate public education for all handicapped children now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In 1969, Prince Street programming was renamed the Secondary Schools Occupational Center (SSOC) program, which provided a half day of vocational education for at-risk students. Eventually, SSOC was replaced with a Secondary Training Education Program (STEP) with increased focus on providing improved outcomes for at-risk populations including students with disruptive class behavior and excessive truancy. This program was paired with a partial independent study program for court-involved youth.

Throughout the early 1990s, ACPS experimented with several alternative approaches to this problem including the Student Support Center (SSC), a designated classroom for on-site suspension, an Adult Basic Education program providing GED preparation and ESL support for drop-out students 16 and older, and an evening adult continuing education program for students 18 and older. In 1993, the ACPS middle school campus, Minnie Howard, was converted to a new 9th Grade Center for all ACPS students. The goal was to help aid in the tough transition for 9th graders from Middle School to High School while maintaining involvement with T.C. athletics and extra-curricular programs. As a result, however, alternative programs were further fragmented throughout the ACPS system. STEP students were re-integrated onto the T.C. Williams campus. Once again, in response to public outcry, ACPS acted quickly to remove students with the most serious

behavior and emotional problems. That year ACPS developed the Services to Adolescents at Risk program (STAR) housed in trailers behind Hammond Middle School. The program, however, was short lived due to serious management issues, high staff turnover, and low enrollment.<sup>3</sup> ACPS simply could not afford to maintain at-risk segregation in the STAR program.<sup>4</sup> Most of the alternative programs ACPS attempted in the 1990s amounted to sub-satisfactory intervention for the district's growing at-risk population. ACPS needed a comprehensive solution for managing this population outside of the home school setting.

### **An Alternative Education Task Force**

In 1994, a newly elected school board initiated a comprehensive alternative education reform effort. In the following year the School Board created the Superintendent's Alternative Education Task Force, under a newly appointed Superintendent Dr. Herbert Berg. Members of the task force were hand selected by the school board, which prior to 1994 had been an appointed body. The task force was comprised of 15 voting members including four citizen representatives, five ACPS representatives, an Alexandria Police Department representative, a Court Services representative, a representative from the Chamber of Commerce and three members from community based organizations. Dr. Berg directed the task force "to study alternative education programs and make recommendations to the Superintendent for improvement and/or expansion in the Alexandria City Public Schools".<sup>5</sup> On October 17, 1995, the alternative education task force began an eight month exploratory study which identified various alternative education programs and schools, reviewed literature on alternative

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<sup>3</sup>"Superintendent's Alternative Education Task Force Report" June, 11 1996.

<sup>4</sup> In 1994 the management team voted to close the program.

<sup>5</sup> "Superintendent's Alternative Education Task Force Report" June, 11 1996.

education, and consulted experts knowledgeable about alternative education programs at the national level.

On June 11, 1996, the task force issued its final recommendations. The group recommended ACPS begin enhancing programs for students in all grades and that it create a separate alternative school for underachieving students in grades 9-12, an estimated \$10 million project. The task force recommended that ACPS organize an Alternative Education Program (AEP) as a continuum of services to students in grades K-12. The alternative education initiative would target students that were unable to excel in a mainstream school setting and prepare these students for the work force.<sup>6</sup> Specific task force recommendations isolated “Students exhibiting difficulty in regularly attending school or class, students performing substantially below their academic potential, students exhibiting behaviors that inhibit success, students who appear unmotivated, and former students seeking to re-enter school and finish their education” as those who should be considered for immediate transition, along with a maintained enrollment of 30% of students who “wanted to be at the school.”<sup>7</sup>

Task force chair Glen Hopkins claimed that a new building would give students a sense of belonging; “they would have something that was theirs”.<sup>8</sup> A separate building, apart from mainstream students, with teachers that wanted to be there would make targeted students more comfortable in an educational setting and more likely to complete

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<sup>6</sup> Ann O’Hanlon “Task Force Looks at Alternative School” Washington Post August 28, 1997.

<sup>7</sup>“Superintendent’s Alternative Education Task Force Report” June, 11 1996. pg iii

<sup>8</sup> Author’s Interview with Glenn Hopkins, Alternative Education Task Force Chair November 5, 2010. All further quotes from Hopkins, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

high school. Moreover, students would want to attend a brand new state-of-the-art facility complete with more desirable facilities than the old building.

However, the formation of a separate 9-12 grade alternative school would radically alter the structure of T.C. Williams High School, targeting minority groups. Once concerned parents and citizens brought the issue to their attention, the Northern Virginia Chapters of the NAACP (NOVA) and Urban League led in the battle against alternative education. Dick Hargraves, former President of NOVA and George Lambert, Chief Executive of the Northern Virginia Urban League, were not convinced that the plan for a separate alternative school was viable option for at-risk students. Over the next year, tension surrounding the task force recommendation mounted in Alexandria, VA. A school which had been championed for racial integration in 1971 would now become the epicenter of racialized education policy outcomes.

#### *The Forced Re-segregation Debate at T.C*

Once released to the public, community members were alarmed by language in the report which was sufficiently ambiguous as to how and when students would be targeted for removal. Task force specifications such as having three or more absences per quarter from any class, being observed as having disruptive behavior, having a poor attitude, acting withdrawn or having a low self-esteem, provided a plausible argument for cultural and/or community specific targeting. At the time, Alexandria's school system was 49 percent African American, 25 percent white and 20 percent Latino. Many of whom were from economically disadvantaged households, which are more likely to experience academic difficulty. Thus, community members were concerned that minority students would be unfairly targeted as prime candidates for alternative education. Other opponents of the

plan argued that a school created for underachieving students would marginalize minority students and serve as a dumping ground for unwanted kids as had become of the STEP program. Parents and students in the community were acutely aware that past ACPS alternative programs were disproportionately filled with Black students. In 1997, STEP was 66% African American, compared to 49% in the total population.

Separating students that are underachieving from those that are doing well would simply put “problem kids” out of site, not address issues within underperforming communities. Rather than enact an alternative system, opponents suggested more rigorous standards outcome-based teaching policy directed toward underperforming schools: “It takes greater effort on the part of teachers in order for students to do well. Underachievement can often be attributed to students’ self-fulfilling prophecy; if teachers believed in the students, they would be more likely to achieve academic success.”<sup>9</sup> According to Dick Hargraves, if the school system were to have reassigned students to another building, school officials would essentially give students the impression that the school board is not confident in the students’ academic abilities. T.C. had a history of disparity between students chosen for accelerated classes and those that were not. Building another school would further alienate minority students: “It is understandable for a parent to want their children to be protected; but, instead of separating students, peer review and peer pressure should be used as mechanisms for teaching these students proper conduct”. Hargraves asserted, “Whether you’re for or against alternative school system, the community must take an active interest. We all have a vested interest in these kids”. George Lambert affirmed the notion that the district’s history would undoubtedly

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<sup>9</sup> Author’s interview with Dick Hargraves on November 4, 2010. All further quotations from Hargraves, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.



prompt a reaction of caution and distrust at any school proposal that has the potential to treat children unfairly on the basis of race.

Discussion of the proposal continued throughout the fall of 1997, public meetings were held across the district.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the year, the NAACP and Urban League conducted a full-scale media campaign in opposition to alternative education in ACPS. Task force members were unprepared for the heightened political pressure and media attention brought on by their recommendations. Task Force Chair Glenn Hopkins was among the few who attempt to respond to the harsh criticisms, suggesting that the task force recommendation to create a separate alternative school did not amount to re-segregated outcomes:

In the political arena some good policies are often rejected for a variety of reasons; in this case it was based on Alexandria's history in the south. They fought hard for integration. The alternative school proposed by the task force would have been a state-of-the-art facility with the best curriculum possible and would give these kids the best environment to succeed. Segregation had nothing to do with this proposal. Every student does not learn the same way; some students do well in large schools, but some do not. Integrated schools have not affected learning; they haven't made blacks any smarter or whites in any dumber.

He further argued that groups that opposed the plan were not educators and therefore did not have the expertise or experience to speak knowledgeably on the decision. Rather, he saw opponents' attacks as a form of lashing out because they did not have control of the reform process. African American task force citizen member Jacqueline Lewis attempted to quell concerns and sympathized with concerns of the opposition but suggested that parents need only be attentive, not anxious.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, alternative education's opponent's heavy attack outweighed task force efforts. In the spring of 1998, Standard of

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<sup>10</sup> Meeting were held on September 25th, October 8th and October 29th

<sup>11</sup> Ann O'Hanlon "Task Force Looks at Alternative School" Washington Post August 28, 1997.

Learning (SOL) tests were administered for the first time at T.C. The school's highest passing rate on the writing test was only 59 percent. In other areas passing rates were worst, Chemistry, 31 percent; Biology, 47 percent; and U.S. History, 20 percent. Over the next decade, T.C. Williams, under the direction of long time school Principle John Porter, also known as “Mr. T.C.”, worked to correct the school’s low performing reputation absent a comprehensive alternative education system. Initiatives instituted in an effort to close the achievement gap included adjusting schedules for students that worked at night and implementing the laptop initiative to give all students access to personal laptops.

In the wake of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), however, the school experienced additional turbulence. NCLB forced schools across the nation to set higher educational standards and establish measurable goals to improve individual outcomes by requiring states to develop standardized assessment tests across basic skills. Virginia uses the SOL for measuring basic skills in the academic areas of mathematics, English, History and Science. In a hearing before the House Budget Committee in 2003, John Porter argued that NCLB is “yet another law passed without the funding necessary to implement the initiative.” During the hearing, Porter noted that the president’s budget eliminated over forty education or education-related programs, crippling many school’s abilities to meet NCLB standards. T.C. Williams was particularly impacted by elimination of funding for small learning communities, a federal grant-based program aimed at enhancing learning outcomes by helping to personalize and contextualize students’ educational experience and facilitate the implementation of other effective strategies for improving student achievement. T.C. Williams was in the process of designing a new building to facilitate a

small learning communities model, when NCLB was passed.<sup>12</sup> Despite delays, in 2007 ACPS opened the new T.C. Williams facility built around the small learning communities model. The small communities model, however, was never implemented.

The retirement of Principle John Porter marked a new era in T.C. leadership. After Porter's retirement, Mel Riddile served 2 academic years, followed by Bill Clendaniel who also served 2 academic years. Teachers expressed concerns that the school lacked rules regarding student behavior and drastically suffered from under-enforced rules. They also expressed concern with inconsistent consequences for tardiness, excessive absences, failure to complete homework and class assignments, and failure to come to class prepared to learn.<sup>13</sup>

### **T.C. Williams in Trouble**

Today, T.C. is a majority minority campus. Forty percent of its 2936 students are African-American, 31% are Hispanic, and 20% are White. The school serves students from approximately 70 different countries; 34 percent of which are foreign born. Many of the foreign students enrolled at T.C. are illiterate in English as well as in their native language<sup>14</sup>. Approximately 50% percent of the student body qualify for free or reduced lunch programs, an indicator for poverty, which makes the school eligible for Title I funding.<sup>15</sup> While many of T.C.'s students matriculate to prominent universities, a significant percentage of students remain "left behind".<sup>16</sup> T.C. has failed to meet adequate yearly progress consecutively since NCLB was enacted. Based on students' scores on the SOL's

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<sup>12</sup> John Porter before the House Budget Committee Democratic Caucus and the Senate Democratic Policy Committee July 18, 2003.

<sup>13</sup>Report on Meeting with Staff Members at T.C. Williams High School by Bena Kallick and Marty Brooks 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Statement of John Porter before the House Budget Committee July 18, 2003.

<sup>15</sup>NAACP News Letter of the Alexandria Branch Report, Spring 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Welsh "At T.C. Williams High School 'low-achieving' Label is a Wake-Up Call". March 21, 2010 *Washington Post*.

for the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years, one in seven T.C. students did not pass English and one in four did not pass mathematics. The school was unsuccessful in reducing its failure rate by 10 to 15 percent for the past two years, a requirement of NCLB (See Appendix A). In response to T.C.'s failure to produce adequate passing rates on standardized tests, on March 3, 2010 the Virginia Department of Education designated T.C. Williams High School a "Persistently Lowest-Achieving" school (PLA). The PLA label highlighted the extent to which T.C. has failed to raise the achievement of its minority students.

The school was not previously subject to government sanctions under NCLB guidelines because, although it was eligible, it did not accept Title I funds.<sup>17</sup> However, in 2010 President Obama revised the definition of persistently lowest-achieving amounting to increased accountability for underperforming schools, matched with increased federal support under the School Improvement Grants program (See Appendix B).<sup>18</sup> The Department of Education ranked T.C. Williams 122 of Virginia's 128 Title I eligible high schools that does not accept federal Title I resources.

In order to remedy the issue of consistently failing scores, the DOE model provided T.C. with four options for change: school turn around, restart model, school closure, or school transformation. Superintendent, Dr. Morton Sherman, was required to provide a written response identifying the district's choice to the Department of Education by April 26, 2010 and submit a proposal outlining the key elements of reform by the end of May

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<sup>17</sup> Title I resources are available for schools that have at least 50% of its students living in poverty and are to be used toward additional instructional assistance. More info on Title I guidelines can be found at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg1.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Alexandria School Faces Federal Sanctions". (March 12, 2010) WMAU Radio.

2010.<sup>19</sup> After nearly five decades of failed attempts, ACPS would have less than two months after to enact a comprehensive reform strategy for T.C. Williams under the direction of Superintendent Morton Sherman.

### *Central Office Support*

Sherman and members of his senior staff increased their presence at the school over the next several weeks in an effort to be more accessible to teachers and students and send a clear message to the community that the decision would be made collaboratively. On March 9th, Sherman spoke to the T.C. students through a taped segment with current T.C. Principal Clendaniel announcing that he had written a letter to President Obama and Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, defending the school. In this letter, he noted that the school had “heart” and also recognized that the school must do a better job of meeting the needs of all of its students. Sherman noted that the school sends 80 percent of its seniors to Ivy League schools. It offers 24 Advanced Placement classes, a curriculum of 188 courses including organic chemistry, and five years of French, German, Latin and Spanish; and it is the areas only comprehensive high school. He argued that the school’s success should not be measured by standardized tests alone. For Sherman, the purpose of the announcement was to demonstrate his support for T.C. throughout the process, but the proclamation was criticized by some. Senior Kelly Porterfield noted his concern, “Obama has two wars and a health care bill on his desk, but he’s going to read this letter and decide to come help us?”<sup>20</sup> Other students questioned what exactly Sherman was asking for in the letter. Senior Johanna Montano asked, “How about instead of writing a letter to the president, they just

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<sup>19</sup> Report on meetings with staff members at T.C. Williams High School.

<sup>20</sup> Bracken, M. “TC: Lowest-Achieving?” (March 16, 2010) *Theogeny*.

work on finding a quick solution to fix the school?”<sup>21</sup> Students castigated Sherman for not indicating how the designation would affect faculty. “Why didn’t he clarify all the rumors? What’s going to happen to our teachers?” asks one student.

The PLA designation had been unexpected for many members of the Alexandria community, not only students. Sherman noted, “For a long time, folks simply turned their heads to the reality of underachievement...” Moreover, “The new VDOE ranking system didn’t tell us anything new, but it did give us a clear and resounding signal that the time is now, that the imperative is real, and we must move forward without blaming or excusing.”<sup>22</sup>

In the following weeks, Sherman had to act quickly to circle the wagons among engaged stakeholders, realizing it would be a challenge to garner community-wide buy-in for any centralized ACPS reform process. One week after the PLA designation, Sherman requested a meeting with leaders in Alexandria’s black community that had been involved in education matters since the alternative education decision in 1997. Sherman met with presidents of the Northern Virginia NAACP Chapter, Urban League, the first African American school board chair, and the Mayor of the City of Alexandria to discuss the school’s performance ranking. In the meeting, he assured attendees that he would choose the least drastic option.

Sherman also actively courted school board representatives, attempting to mitigate any dissent with an ACPS decision. In a school board meeting held during the early stages of reform selection, elected member Blanche Maness indicated the board would be prepared to support Sherman as well as T.C. staff in the reform selection and reform implementation process:

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

I think it's so important that we as board members send a clear message to T.C. Williams' staff members that we all own this and we are a part of the solution and they see us as the helpers. What can we, as board members, do to help T.C. Williams? That is our school. I'm just very conscious and very sensitive to the teaching staff in particular that they recognize that the school board is not a group that thinks of a punishment or that there's blame to cast. Please share with the staff that the board is part of the solution.<sup>23</sup>

During both school board meetings and a series of community meetings, Sherman shared critical information regarding the reform process including project deadlines, reform models, and meetings with state officials and T.C. Faculty.

Other groups were less apt to work directly with Sherman. Some parents consulted with former Principle John Porter, generally perceived as a T.C. insider. The PLA designation had caused panic among parents; they did not want their children to attend a school perceived as subpar. They asked Porter if it would be in their children's best interest to be transferred to private school.<sup>24</sup> Porter assured parents that students' chances of acceptance into a competitive university would not be negatively impacted by the designation. Porter expressed concern that if these students transferred, failure rates at T.C. Williams would significantly increase. He believed that parents with the means to transfer their children to private school are more likely to be those of high achieving students. Therefore, an even greater percentage of at-risk students would remain at T.C. Williams and would guarantee an increase in failure rates.<sup>25</sup> He urged parents to become actively involved in the reform process rather than abandoning T.C.

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<sup>23</sup> Recorded school board meeting March 25, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Generally in cases in which a school is underperforming, parents have the option of transferring to another public school in the district. However, because T. C Williams High School is the only high school in the City of Alexandria, this was not an option.

<sup>25</sup> Author's Interview with John Porter October 19, 2010. All further quotes from Porter, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

### *Reviewing the Options*

Under the School Improvement Grants program, Sherman was faced with four options for reform. The first option was School Closure model; students would be transferred to another school in the district. This option was dismissed immediately for a few reasons. To begin, T.C. Williams is the only high school in the city of Alexandria; there is no alternative. Secondly, ACPS had recently opened a \$100 million state-of-the-art facility. It would have been politically infeasible and economically irresponsible to close the facility down after only three years of operation.

The second choice was the Restart Model in which T.C would reopen as a charter school in the following academic year. In most cases, the charter option would involve turning over school operation to a charter school operator, a Charter Management Operation (CMO), or an Education Management Organization (EMO). There was some community support for this option. Andrew Campanella, Spokesman for the Alliance for School Choice made a public statement supporting the charter option:

It is fundamentally unfair that Alexandria parents are forced to send their children to a school that fails, year after year. The Alexandria School Board needs to summon the political will power to do what's best for the children in our classrooms, and that means starting the process of creating a charter school for Alexandria.<sup>26</sup>

One month prior to the PLA designation, Sherman had announced his support for the charter school concept.<sup>27</sup> However, Sherman recanted quickly, noting he had changed his view on charter schools. While attending an educators' conference in Richmond Virginia, Sherman noted that he had observed that other schools in Virginia that had chosen the

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<sup>26</sup> Pope, M. "T.C. In Crisis: More Bad News at High School Determined to be 'Persistently Low-Achieving'". (March 11, 2010) *Alexandria Gazette*.

<sup>27</sup> NAACP News Report (Spring 2010).



Restart model had performed considerably poorer than schools that had chosen other models.<sup>28</sup> Schools that chose the Restart model received additional funds, but according to Sherman, “You do things because you have a deep interest in what you do, not because someone gives you more money”; he did not want to incentivize results. When asked which of the options were immediately dismissed, Sherman stated “The two that dealt with creating charter schools or bringing outside folks in to run the school. I believe that our staff, with some changes and lots of support, could turn around the school”.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Sherman dismissed the charter option.<sup>30</sup> There have, however, been cases in which the Restart model has proven to be very effective. The Urban Prep Charter School in Chicago, IL, an all boys’ school located in one of the city’s toughest neighborhoods has been successful. Only 4 percent of its students were reading at grade level upon entering high school, but 2010, all of its pupils were accepted to some form of college.<sup>31</sup>

The third model, school Turnaround, required the replacement of the principal, termination of all existing staff and re-hire no more than 50 percent. Sherman suggested that at some point this option was seriously considered. However, Sherman was acutely aware of the dangers of the Turnaround model. A school board in Central Falls, Rhode Island relied on the turnaround model when the negotiations on transforming the school failed. Consequently, the principal, three assistant principals and 77 teachers were terminated. The story gained national media attention as citizens heavily protested the

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<sup>28</sup> Superintendent’s meeting with Vision and Action Committee April 15, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Author’s Interview with Superintendent Morton Sherman November 18, 2010. All further quotes from Sherman, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that when asked “Of the four options given, were there any that were out of the question from the beginning? Why?” Sherman’s response was “The two that dealt with creating charter schools or bringing outside folks in to run the school. I believe that our staff, with some changes and lots of support, could turn around the school.”

<sup>31</sup> Paulson, A. “Inner-City Chicago Charter School has Perfect Acceptance Rate” (April 8, 2010) *Christian Science Monitor*.

plan<sup>32</sup>. In a school board meeting on March 25, 2010, Sherman noted that the Central High School case demonstrated that the turnaround option would be disruptive to progress. Similar disruption would most certainly occur in Alexandria.

Sherman ultimately chose the Transformation model. The transformation model required T.C. Williams to provide comprehensive instructional programs, increase learning time by establishing schedules and strategies, as well as provide means for family and community involvement. Sherman argued, “I believe that our staff, with some changes and lots of support, could turn around the school”. The transformation model required significant changes in school leadership, operation, and structure. Key elements would include teacher evaluation, professional development, and student outcomes.

#### *The Hustle toward Reform*

T.C. Williams was given two months to develop an effective transformation model, a process that usually takes nine months to one year. Preliminary planning was completed by staff of the school board’s central office and T.C. Williams staff. <sup>33</sup> Sherman emphasized total transparency during the transformation process and encouraged parents, students, faculty and members of the community to be involved in the change. He instituted a “transformation situation room” at T.C. Williams as a venue for faculty, parents, and students to track the progress of the transformation process. He also established the Vision and Action Committee which began meeting April 13, 2010. Under the direction of T.C. staff, the purpose of the committee was to develop a long-range vision and plan for sustainability. The Vision and Action Committee included teachers, students, and various members of the community including politicians, business owners, and court service

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<sup>32</sup>Ray, H. “Plan to Fire Teachers Roils RI’s Poorest City” (February 24, 2010) *Boston Globe*.

<sup>33</sup> Letter to Alexandria School Board May 27, 2010

workers. It was separated into five subcommittees: content and programs, pedagogy, student engagement and relationships, family and community partnerships and student support. Each sub-committee would be responsible for elements in the transformation proposal.

As school officials and the Vision and Action committee worked feverishly to develop a transformation model, questions remained among many. Committee members did not know how much money the school would be allocated once a reform process was enacted. They were given an estimate based on other models but estimates were based on a school of 500 students; TC had nearly 3,000 students. While constructing details for transformation, they were only aware that funding would be made available June 15, 2010. Also, some parts of the grant application were vague.<sup>34</sup>

Alexandria was able to use the broad framework provided by the federal government to develop a plan that is now being considered as a possible national model. The complete transformation model consists of the following key components: individual achievement plans, professional learning plans, related school support programs and structures, accounting and monitoring to ensure individual student achievement, and collaboration with external partners and organizations. Under the plan, there would be separate directors for curriculum and instruction, athletics and student activities, pathways to graduation, Science and Math, English and Social Studies, Fine Arts, and career and technical education. The academic principals would be responsible for monitoring

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<sup>34</sup> Taken from a recorded school board meeting March 25, 2010. One board member expressed concern that there were questions on the grant application that did not require very specific information; some questions only required an “x” in a box and did not allow room for elaboration.

instruction and evaluating teachers across these areas.<sup>35</sup> And, the principal of T.C. would be replaced. On June 3, 2010, Superintendent Sherman presented T.C.'s transformation plan to the school board. It was formally approved Thursday June 10, 2010 and the application submitted to the Department of Education Wednesday June 30, 2010, fourteen weeks after the initial PLA announcement.<sup>36</sup> T.C. Williams will be provided with \$2 million for each of the next three years for the necessary changes. The federal government is optimistic that TC's transformation model will result in a significant increase in academic success and currently looking at this plan as a possible national model for reform.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Branch, C and Alex Hampi. "TC's Transformation Begins" (September 1, 2010) *Alexandria News*.

<sup>36</sup> TC Williams High School Model Resolution.

<sup>37</sup> Perkins, D. "Feds Eye T.C. Makeover as Possible National Model" (October 8, 2010) *Alexandria Times*.

## **Appendix A**

### **Chronology of Events**

October 17, 1995

- Alternative Education task force begins researching alternative education for Alexandria City Public Schools

June 11, 1996

- Alternative education task force recommends the creation of a separate alternative school for underachieving students

1997

- School board rejects task force's recommendation to create separate school for alternative education

Wednesday, March 3, 2010

- Virginia Department of Education announces that T.C. Williams High School has been designated a "persistently low-achieving school" based on Standards of Learning Assessments in Language Arts and end of course tests and results from previous two years for 11<sup>th</sup> grade Algebra I, Algebra II and Geometry.

Wednesday, April 7, 2010

- Superintendent Sherman meets with Department of Education Officials in Richmond, Virginia

Tuesday, April 13, 2010

- First Vision and Action Committee Meeting

Thursday, June 3, 2010

- Alexandria School Board endorses the transformation model

Thursday, June 10, 2010

- Transformation Model is formally approved by Alexandria School Board

Wednesday, June 30, 2010

- Formal application is submitted to Department of Education

## Appendix B

E-Mail sent on March 2, 2010 by the Virginia Department of Education

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) has been informed that on March 3, 2010, USED will begin posting the states' definitions of persistently lowest-achieving (PLA) schools and the list of those schools. USED will only post the information for states with an approved definition.

To receive approval from USED, VDOE was required to submit a revised definition of PLA and subsequent list of schools. The list of schools identified as Tier I did not change as a result of the revised definition. This list of schools identified as Tier II did change as a result of the revised definition.

States have been assured that the changes requested by USED will not affect schools previously identified and submitted through the Race to the Top grants. The revised list of schools will have an impact on the 1003(g) School Improvement Grant funds.

Listed below is the revised approved definition and list of schools.

Revised Based on Request from the United States Department of Education (USED) Persistently Lowest-Achieving Schools

A persistently lowest-achieving school is defined as:

- A. Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that is among the lowest-achieving five percent of Title I schools in improvement, corrective action or restructuring based on the academic achievement of the "all students" group in reading/language arts and mathematics combined and the school has not reduced its failure rate in reading/language arts and/or mathematics by 10 to 15 percent each year for the past two years (Tier I); or
- B. A secondary school that is eligible for, but does not receive, Title I funds that is among the lowest-achieving five percent of schools based on the academic achievement of the "all students" group in reading/language arts and mathematics combined and the school has not reduced its failure rate in reading/language arts and/or mathematics by 10 to 15 percent for each year for the past two years (Tier II); or
- C. A high school that has had a graduation rate as defined in 34 CFR 200.19(b) that is less than 60 percent for two years.

As required by the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF)- Phase II requirements, the following factors were considered to identify the persistently lowest-achieving schools: 1) the academic achievement of the "all students" group in reading/language arts and mathematics combined; and 2) the schools' lack of progress on those assessments over a number of years in the "all students" group. The adding ranks method stipulated in the United States Department of Education (USED). Frequently Asked Questions concerning Phase II of the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund. December 1, 2009, was used to determine the academic achievement of the "all students" group.

Tier II\*\*

### Persistently Lowest-Achieving Schools That Meet Criterion B

Division	School	2008 Reading Pass Rate	2009 Reading Pass Rate	2008 Mathematics Pass Rate	2009 Mathematics Pass Rate
Academic Achievement					
Alexandria City Public Schools	T.C. Williams High School	82.03	84.42	78.5	76.65
Colonial Beach Public Schools	Colonial Beach High School	85.88	76.47	69.09	73.29
Danville City Public Schools	Lanston Focus High School	41.86	57.75	14.56	51.58
King and Queen County Public Schools	Central High School	84.96	73.79	75.36	80.65
Prince Edward County Public Schools	Prince Edward County High School	92.55	85.57	88.49	73.66
Richmond City Public Schools	Armstrong High School	81.96	87.37	68.51	71.34

\*\* The total number of Title I eligible secondary schools for the 2009-2010 school year is 128

< A group below state definition for personally identifiable results

## Focus Questions

1. Since the passage of NCLB, education reform efforts have typically focused on top-down comprehensive management, placing a renewed interest on teaching outcomes to enhance student performance. What can you take away from this case as it relates to top-down education reform policy?
2. Describe the dominant advocacy coalition in place in 2010 versus 1997?
3. What is Policy Learning in an advocacy coalition? Did policy learning occur in 2010? How might policy learning have changed outcomes in 2010 versus those in 1997?
4. While the case focuses on ACPs's efforts to use alternative education programs to fill the achievement gap among historically low performing populations, what other more viable solutions might work?

## Citations

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