

Steve Barr
Testimony to the Little Hoover Commission
November 19, 2009

Green Dot Public Schools, which I founded in 1999, currently has 19 small preparatory high schools--18 serving the highest need areas in Los Angeles and 1 in the South Bronx. Currently we serve about 7500 students. What we're most known for--part of the reason why I'm here--is that we go into areas where there are 60 to 70 percent drop-out rates and we retain and graduate over 80% of those same kids with the same dollars. And nearly 80% of *those* kids are accepted right out of our schools to 4-year universities. And those are areas, I might add, where maybe 4% of the kids graduate from college. So, some people would point to that and say that's a reversal of the achievement gap.

I think our role as a charter school organization--besides serving the kids we serve--is Research and Development. And the result of the R&D of Green Dot is clear-cut across the board—and that's that African American kids and latino kids can learn when they're in a system that's small, has high expectations, the dollars get in the classroom, there's support for our product (which is teaching), we're accountable to parents and we ask parents to be involved. In that vision, we think it not only serves our ultimate stakeholders—which are the students—but also teachers. We're unique in that we have a pro-active approach to teachers' unions. We have our own teachers union. Our union contract instead of tenure has “just-cause” so there are protections. We have no minutes and hours in a work-day, but a professional workday. And there's ultimate accountability; job stability is not just based on seniority but also on performance. We're affiliated with the California Teachers Association and the NEA. We're also in a unique partnership in New York with the UFT and AFT and Randi Weingarten.

With the school in New York, the R&D will tell us that when you have total alignment between the chancellor, the Mayor and the president of the teachers union and you have \$12,000 per pupil and a free facility and everyone's pulling the same way, the success of that school should be guaranteed. Whereas in Los Angeles, we are in the middle of a tribal warfare between the teachers' union status quo, the parents, against what I think is a pretty good researched and developed model of success.

We've now switched from R&D to what is the ultimate goal of Green Dot—systemic change. Two years ago, we enacted No Child Left Behind by getting the majority of the tenured teachers at Alain Locke High School in Watts to agree to a charter transformation. Locke represents 7 of our 18 schools in Los Angeles. And the reason why our transformation of Locke High, and other similar projects, is relevant is the impact it will have on the economy. Locke High School was founded 40 years ago following the Watts Riots. If you look at the statistics, 60,000 people have attended that high school during this time. Imagine if you could get all those people together. It would fill a pretty nice-sized stadium. If you got on the public address system and you say to those 60,000 people, “please leave the stadium if you didn't graduate from Locke High School,” about 40,000 people would have to leave the stadium. Now you have 20,000 people left. Now if you got on the P.A. system and said to those people, “now

leave the stadium if you didn't get into a 4 year university." Why is that important? Because we know that those people will make over a million dollars more in a life-time and will have the minimal requirements to maybe even come back and teach at that school. So, from 20,000 we'd now be down to only 8,000 left in the stadium where there once stood 60,000. If you said to them, "now step out of the stadium if you didn't complete your bachelor's degree," all but 2100 people would have to leave. Now you only have 2100, maybe 2200 where there once stood 60,000 people. If you said, "now please step out if you didn't come back to your neighborhood and become a teacher, become politically active, start a business or a charter school," just a small handful of people would be left in the stadium. Taking into account the amazing work done by the clergy, gang intervention programs and non-profits, nothing will fix that neighborhood until you fix that school.

The problem with Los Angeles is that there are a lot of Locke High Schools and the problem with this country is that there are thousands of Locke High Schools. Green Dot's R&D tells me that until we get all the tribes gathered—leadership aligned with a clear mission, teachers unions to pull with us, interest groups willing to give up some interest, and you rally parents to create demand—nothing will change in our schools and nothing will change in our economy.