

To Save Public HS Education We Must Reinvent It: “If high schools are airports, principals are air traffic controllers” — *Man Creates Pilot School to Help Students Soar*

High school is a place that helps young people get ready to function in the adult world—it is a tumultuous time to learn valuable life skills, it is a means to achieve long term goals and feel a sense of pride in accomplishment. However, America’s public high school education system is underperforming. Every year, over 1.2 million students drop out of high school in the U.S. Researchers have connected many drop out factors to socioeconomic status in that when students have to worry about necessities like food, shelter, and safety, they cannot invest their energy in school. In today’s job market, not having a college degree can be a roadblock to many careers, unquestionably, lacking a high school diploma closes off even more avenues. America’s public high school educational system has not completely failed, but it is surely failing, as a result the national achievement gap and poverty levels have broadened which is unacceptable for a nation that believes itself to be a world leader. Part of the problem may be attributed to the fact that society does not know who to hold accountable for such failure which has been a topic of debate for many decades.

Huntington Park High School—one of Los Angeles Unified School District’s inner-city schools, is not drastically different than other public schools in the state, it sits at the bottom for student performance, and has for years. At one point the school’s nearly 4,000 student population overwhelmed the facility and these overcrowded classrooms made it tough to learn and tougher for teachers to be effective. Such schools typically enroll large numbers of minority students, many of them identify as English language learners or having special learning needs. The students, almost all from immigrant families, are among the lowest achieving as measured by standardized tests. Their families often live in poverty and encounter danger in their

neighborhoods, all conditions that pose extra challenges to these students' academic success. Many schools that serve high-poverty students have a long history of failure, frequent administrative turnover, and marked by disorder, which to no surprise might explain why less than a third of the city's residents possess a high school education.

The failure of many urban schools to effectively and consistently serve their high-poverty students continues to be one of the most critical problems in high school public education. One reason the education system is failing may be due to the fact that there is a lack of education innovation. It stands to reason that if students are changing, curriculum must change too. More specifically, it is time to modify education to reflect the demands of the demographics of the modern classroom. There are policy and practice changes taking place all over the nation – many driven by educators – that address the cultural shifts in the classroom. Public education in America needs teachers who are better trained to meet the needs of specific student populations, understand the necessary role of learning, and are willing to speak up to facilitate classroom change. Public education in America needs more educators like Jon Chaikittirattana, who after a long and ambivalent journey created a Pilot school, presently serving as the Principal at the



Huntington Park Institute of Applied Medicine at Linda Marquez High School—a product of his successes.

Jon received a BA in Health Sciences from CSULB and pursued a Master's in Education in Educational Leadership and Administration from GWU. Jon identifies as a minority himself, of Thai and Mexican descent, and has several years of experience working in public education. He has served in the classroom setting, as a teacher for eleven

years, and on the administration level as a principal, for five years, so he's first handedly familiar with issues facing public education. His school offers the most AP classes, several junior college courses, and a distinguished music program in the city of Huntington Park, all which have made it the top public choice school in the area. Jon is on the right track towards pursuing educational equity for it is believed that unequal access to and participation in advanced high school courses are among the mix of factors that lead to the broader achievement gap—low income and minority children, whose academic performance lags far behind that of middle class and white children.

When Jon began his career as a teacher for LAUSD at Huntington Park High in 1996, the district's graduation rate was lingering at 55-percent. The fact that only half of the district's students were graduating shook Jon and triggered him to take action. Jon has always considered himself an advocate of education, in an interview he states "I always felt that it doesn't matter if a student comes from a poor neighborhood, uneducated environment, or from a family that doesn't know what school is, every student deserves the right to a world class education. It doesn't matter where one comes from, everyone is capable." Over the years, in an attempt to counteract the inherent negative effects of poverty and poor academic achievement for low income and students of color, he created his own small learning community aimed at exploring mental health related careers at HPHS while he served as a teacher of Health. The school served only a small portion of the entire student population and after witnessing improvements the district requested that more small learning communities be built throughout the school and directed Jon as the Small Learning Communities Coordinator. He describes this position as a pivotal moment in his life as he learned how to operate a school, both inside and outside the classroom setting, giving him hope to one day run his own school.

In 2010, as assessed by the Department of Education's Academic Performance Index, only one out of every 20 HPHS students tested proficient or better in math and one in every four scored proficient or better in English. The school at one point had a 26-percent dropout rate in addition to its abysmal test performance. The District Superintendent, John Deasey, illuminated that on average 1 in 3 freshmen at HPHS dropped out, and 7 out of 100 attended a four-year university. The shocking statistics prompted LAUSD officials to vow to move quickly to bring sweeping change to the nation's second largest school system. For the first time in history, an educational reform war had begun and the student-teacher community at HPHS felt the weight of the national debate. By 2011, with plans to overhaul the failing school the LAUSD approved a plan to reconstitute HPHS by replacing the staff at school as an example of reforms officials wanted to implement district-wide. Low-performing schools were targeted by faculty sweeps and through the district's actions it became evident that the district blamed teachers for student's academic failure maintaining that the problem was bad teachers and their pedagogy.

Jon explains that forming his small learning community became possible after he wrote a grant proposal that the district strongly favored, as a result he was awarded a \$30,000 implementation grant to get his program started. In 2011, after HPHS was reconstituted, Jon gathered an elite group of teachers with the same vision and wrote a plan for the district to upgrade his small learning community into a Pilot school which he named the Huntington Park Institute of Applied Medicine. In August of 2012, the LAUSD granted him permission to relocate his school to a new site in the city, Linda Marquez High School. Today his small school serves nearly 700 students and has incorporated a medicine-based theme curriculum aimed at

preparing students for college and careers through rigorous academics and work-based learning. The 2016 U.S News & World Report's Best High Schools ranking awarded the top 6,041 public high schools in the nation with gold, silver and bronze medals indicating its level of college



readiness— Jon's school was awarded a gold medal.

Additionally, the school's current graduation rate this year is expected to be 95-percent, averaging higher than the LAUSD's average graduation rate of 77-percent and although his school is not at a one hundred percent graduation rate, Jon is optimistic that he can achieve that in the future years.

Born in the desperation in inner cities, a new paradigm of public education emerged to better fit the realities of the 21st century. Pilot schools originated in Boston, Massachusetts, were created to be models of educational innovation and serve as research and development sites for effective urban public schools. Pilot schools are a network of public schools that have autonomy over budget, curriculum and assessment, school calendar, staffing, and governance. The autonomy aspect means that school leaders make the key decisions, allowing them to operate with greater flexibility in order to meet their students' needs. Although Pilot schools are granted five autonomies that come with increased accountability, they are held to a higher standard by the district than a regular school because they do not follow the mold of a comprehensive school. Designed to be smaller, Jon stresses that the personalization piece of a Pilot school is really what makes it different than a traditional school. All the students know their teachers, and vice versa, which creates a welcoming family atmosphere that promotes knowledge.

A good school has an involved staff working together, pushing themselves and their students to be the best they can be. Failure is not an option for the teacher or the students. One characteristic that make a school great is students want to be there—effective schools have a warm climate. Students feel welcome and know that the staff cares about them. Although there is pressure to perform, it comes in a way that promotes learning, with an expectation that students will excel and the support is provided to make it happen. Jon holds that teachers are the number one asset or could be the number one detriment to a school. He believes carrying out his role as principal is a little piece of what makes his school great. Jon describes his job as an air traffic controller ensuring that things operate smoothly. On that account, if high schools are airports, principals are air traffic controllers, and teachers are pilots instructing their student how to fly their own plane called life. He highly stresses that his teachers make his school great because day in and day out they are constantly interacting with their students subsequently having the highest impact.



After several years in the field, Jon still finds joy in his profession every day and on the fifth of February he accomplished one thousand straight days without a single absence from work, an act that manifests his terrific work ethic. Jon says with much enthusiasm that it brings him great satisfaction when he comes across old students who have grown up, “I am happy to

know that I have had some influence on all my students, by pushing them or poking them in the direction they are in.” He claims coming across former students who are out and about, pursuing happiness, and doing what they want to do makes his job as a principal feel worthwhile. His future plans include: obtaining a Doctorate in Education to better serve his students and his community, undoubtedly, without driven educators like him, effective reform to meet national demand would not be possible.