

Executive Summary

Research from across the nation consistently shows **middle school** to be a time of extraordinary risk for children. Grades and test scores plummet during the elementary to middle school transition and continue to decline through 8th grade; students begin to disengage from family and school and experiment with unhealthy behaviors; school attendance drops, and violence increases. This middle school “achievement dip” exists nearly everywhere in the U.S. This decline is much more pronounced in at-risk communities, where students are more likely to lack quality schools, quality out-of-school-time activities, and positive role models — and where they are more likely to be surrounded by poverty, to encounter violence and gangs in their neighborhoods and schools, and to face significant barriers to learning.

As early as 1975, the founders of Higher Achievement recognized the vulnerability of the middle school transition and gross educational inequities facing low-income youth in Washington, D.C. They developed an intensive, rigorous, year-round academic enrichment program for middle school youth based on a compelling theory of change, **rooted in academic opportunity**, provided during the afterschool and summer hours. Through years of continuous program improvements and deep investment in evaluation, Higher Achievement now knows what works: 95 percent of our scholars advance to top academic high schools and 93 percent go on to college – a striking contrast to their peers who are ten times more likely to drop out of high school.

The program’s innovative model and significant impact attracted attention in districts across the country. In 2006, Higher Achievement began planning to replicate its model in cities outside of Washington, DC. Private sector investments from foundations such as the William T. Grant Foundation and The Atlantic Philanthropies and corporations such as Altria enabled Higher Achievement to implement the plan and create an infrastructure to support growth. Since that time, Higher Achievement has more than doubled in size: serving 800 scholars, engaging more than 750 volunteer mentors, and successfully partnering with four additional school districts – Alexandria, VA, Baltimore, MD, Richmond, VA, and Pittsburgh, PA.

On a parallel path, Higher Achievement undertook the bold initiative to conduct the country’s first randomized, longitudinal study examining an academic intervention among middle school students during out-of-school time (OST). The study, which began in March 2006 with publication and dissemination by May 2013, will examine results from nearly 1000 students. The 24-month interim results are demonstrating Higher Achievement’s significant impact – in the only rigorous study of similar design and scope, Higher Achievement is the first OST organization that can demonstrate statistically significant increases in math *and* reading test scores. More importantly, there is strong evidence to suggest that those students in Higher Achievement have improved attitudes towards learning and are more likely to stay in high school and attend college. The results emphasize the importance of our year-round, multi-year approach to reverse the traditional middle school decline and place students on the path to high school, college, and career success.

Higher Achievement has positive results, a program that works, a strong base of infrastructure, and a moral imperative to reach as many children as possible. We have also learned through experience and significant trial and error that expansion through replication of our traditional model alone is not sustainable. With that knowledge, we are launching a new approach to expansion – a three point plan that expands Higher Achievement’s reach to middle school youth. This plan leverages the power of communities to build the sector, increase opportunities for middle school youth, and strengthen middle schools – thus contributing to reform efforts to transform high schools and improve college and career-readiness.

This plan builds on our proven model and adds two key strategies.

- I. Replicate Proven Model – Ensure Quality & Sustainability**
- II. Increase Academic Opportunities through Partnerships - Scaling What Works**
- III. Provide Professional Development and Capacity Building to the Sector**

Through research, experience and results, we know that increasing opportunities to middle school youth can lead to success in school and in life. Higher Achievement has proven that a robust set of experiences is required to reverse the middle school decline. This “scholar experience” is the Higher Achievement formula for success in school and beyond:

- rigorous year-round learning environment
- homework help
- caring role models
- culture of high expectations
- exposure to standards-aligned curriculum in math, literature, science and social studies
- experiential activities to make learning fun
- exposure to colleges and universities, as well as enriching cultural instruction and field trips

By adopting three dynamic strategies for impact, Higher Achievement will base its program delivery and services on the needs identified in each community in order to make this holistic scholar experience available to middle school students in need.

In communities that lack quality OST programming for middle school students, we will deliver our core model through traditional achievement centers. Where smaller gaps in services exist, we will partner with other youth-serving organizations to provide robust scholar experiences, leveraging local investment and avoiding duplication of services. Finally, when communities, districts and organizations seek to improve their services, we will leverage our best practices, infrastructure, and history of success to strengthen the sector and improve outcomes for youth.

This three-point strategy allows Higher Achievement to saturate the regions we serve, leveraging our achievement centers, new partnerships, and increased capacity in the sector to bring our theory of change to life in the middle school years. **With the right interventions, those years become a launching point to success rather than a period of risk.** By leveraging existing locations with their leadership and programmatic infrastructure, reputation and relationships, Higher Achievement will target new growth within the states of our existing affiliates (the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania.) We will also continue with due diligence and, based on community need and commitment, plan to add one additional new affiliate location in the coming year.

The third strategy builds on all that we currently do to support our traditional achievement centers, monitor quality in our centers and partnerships, and develop the essential talent to implement these services. A measured approach in implementing the third strategy will allow Higher Achievement to conduct a thorough market analysis, refine our training content, and implement a new learning management system (LMS.) Higher Achievement will build a platform that can both benefit internal staff training requirements and be accessible for external users. This becomes one of the delivery mechanisms for the capacity building and professional development that we can make available to educators, program providers and other interested parties within the communities we currently serve. The LMS and professional development services can also be used by our partners, which will further allow us to impact quality delivery within the partnership model.

Higher Achievement proposes the following implementation timeline, bringing this expanded vision of impact to life over the next three years:

Year 1 (2012-2013)

- Open fifth affiliate with two achievement centers (Strategy 1)
- Continue partnership pilot in Richmond; pilot partnerships in DC Metro, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh affiliates (Strategy 2)
- Implement new LMS to support current achievement centers and partnership pilots (Strategy 3)
- Build a financial model and conduct a market analysis (Strategy 3)

Year 2 (2013-2014)

- Promote 48-month findings from randomized, longitudinal study
- Open additional achievement centers in DC Metro region, launch new centers in Baltimore, Richmond, and Pittsburgh (Strategy 1)
- Evaluate partnership models in Richmond, DC Metro, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh (Strategy 2)
- Pilot initial training module, with content driven by market demand (Strategy 3)

Year 3 (2014-2015)

- Expand work in new affiliate through additional center(s) or new partnership— depending on need (Strategy 1 or 2)
- Expand training modules and activities (Strategy 3)
- Revisit expansion strategies to evaluate impact and viability

This three-point approach to expansion (implementation, partnership and capacity-building) will allow Higher Achievement to double the number of communities it serves, quadruple the number of scholars served in these communities, broaden the network of community supporters and mobilize people, resources and assets to bring a higher level of public and private investment in middle school. Higher Achievement plans to reach 10 communities by 2017.

By adopting a new, differentiated approach to expansion, Higher Achievement will:

- Double the communities served and expand our reach to serve more than 5,000 underserved middle school students through a combination of core model implementation and partnership program delivery.
- Strengthen the sector as a whole by sharing best practices with other youth-serving organizations and school districts, resulting in stronger outcomes for up to 25,000 students.
- Expand the pipeline of students that will be prepared to attend top performing high schools and be college and career ready by end of 12th grade.
- Ensure successful transitions from 8th to 9th grade by working with schools and community partners to monitor and support students to overcome the challenges that come with this transition.
- Increase the level of private and public support for middle school and the intervening strategies that can ensure that no middle school student is left unsupported during this critical stage.

Higher Achievement seeks bold, forward-thinking, and strategic partners to help us launch this next exciting phase of expanded impact. While the plan is aggressive, it presents significant opportunities to:

- Prepare more underserved students for success
- Strengthen local education systems
- Partner with other youth serving organizations and leverage investments to increase youth outcomes, including academic achievement
- Build stronger ties between and among students, educators, families and volunteers
- Impact the sector through best practice sharing and capacity building
- Influence systemic reform through state and federal policy
- Develop a future talented and diverse workforce
- Affect employee retention and satisfaction through meaningful partnerships that allow corporations to deeply engage in their communities

Higher Achievement

Closing the Opportunity Gap through Three Dynamic Strategies

The Need

The Solution

Strategies

Outcomes

Impact

Middle school is a time of great risk for children, marked by an academic decline that is most-pronounced in at-risk communities with significant barriers to learning, leaving students unprepared for high school and the college track.

Close the opportunity gap for underserved students, providing them with a robust set of experiences that reverse the middle school decline and launch them to success in high school, college, and beyond:

- rigorous year-round learning environment
- homework help
- caring role models
- culture of high expectations
- exposure to standards-aligned curriculum in math, literature, science and social studies
- experiential activities that make learning fun
- exposure to colleges and universities

I. Replicate Proven Model – Ensure Quality & Sustainability

In high-need communities lacking rigorous out-of-school time academic programs, we will deliver our core model through traditional achievement centers.

II. Increase Academic Opportunities through Partnerships - Scaling What Works

Where smaller gaps in services exist, we will partner with other organizations to provide robust scholar experiences, leveraging local investment and avoiding duplication of services.

III. Provide Professional Development and Capacity Building to the Sector

We will leverage our best practices, infrastructure, and history of success to strengthen the sector and improve outcomes for youth.

By adopting a new, differentiated approach to expansion, Higher Achievement will:

- Double the communities served and expand our approach to reach to serve more than **5,000** underserved middle school students through a combination of core model implementation and partnership program delivery
- Strengthen the sector as a whole by sharing best practices with other youth-serving organizations and school districts, resulting in stronger outcomes for up to **25,000** students
- Expand the pipeline of students prepared to attend top performing high schools and be college and career ready by end of 12th grade.

Higher Achievement creates lasting change – putting individual students on a path to success, breaking the cycle of poverty for families, and strengthening the social fabric of communities.

- **Scholars** go on to high school, college, and careers – becoming engaged citizens, active leaders, and change agents in their school and communities

- **Families** are given the knowledge and tools to advocate for their children – making their voices heard in their schools, challenging the status quo in their communities, and changing the education landscape for all children

- **Mentors** build awareness about education and middle school youth and mobilize networks of people – from corporations to individuals – who otherwise would not be involved in education issues

- **Schools** are impacted by scholar success in the classroom – Higher Achievement scholars “raise the bar” for academics, behavior, and social skills among their peers

- **Communities** embrace a dramatic shift – a culture where high achievement is the norm and anything less is unacceptable