



# THE LEADERSHIP SCHOOL

EMPOWERING LITTLE LEARNERS TO BECOME LITTLE LEADERS



## Meet the Leaders

In 1996 two girls began their freshman year at a high-performing, well-resourced school just outside of St. Louis. One was awake by 5 a.m. in preparation for her 1.5-hour bus ride from the northside of St. Louis to her mostly white school in the suburbs; the other was not yet aware of her privilege living just minutes from the coveted high school. The St. Louis desegregation program was established to increase racial integration in public schools and involved bussing black students from the city to typically higher performing, mostly white schools outside

of the city. The two young girls embarking on their high school years had no idea that this would be the beginning of a lifelong friendship and the catalyst 27 years later for them to partner together to create a top-notch public school in the St. Louis area that currently lacks any high-quality educational opportunities.

We are those two young girls and lifelong friends. We both went on to University of Missouri-Columbia, developed a passion for teaching, and went our separate ways to begin our teaching careers - one to teach in Chicago and the other to teach in Miami. We spent the next 18 years teaching and leading in schools across the country, always coming back together to reflect on our aspirations as educators.

By 2022, we had both returned to St. Louis and were now mothers searching for schools that would meet the high bar of excellence we had for the quality of our own children's learning experiences. In this process, several stark realities set in - there are not enough seats in high-quality schools in the St. Louis area; educators and students are not physically, emotionally, socially, or intellectually well, which the pandemic further highlighted; and the instruction being provided for students across the city is not preparing them for success in their future. Keisha and Courtney united on their frustration of the current educational opportunities for students in St. Louis. The schools that were serving the most vulnerable children in our hometown were heavily impacted by the post-pandemic drought of educators, the loss of learning students experienced during virtual learning, and a general lack of experienced educational experts across the city. Having the opportunity to some work in several different charter schools across the city allowed us to see the stark reality of the state of education in St. Louis. We saw teachers rotating in and out of schools on a regular basis, classrooms being staffed by substitutes with no formal training, and a very low bar for instruction across the board. By early 2023, we were busy planning for a new charter school that would change the course of education in the city of St. Louis. We applied for and were accepted into a two-year fellowship through The Opportunity Trust in which we would plan for and launch a brand-new innovative school in the city of St. Louis.

## Transitioning to The Leadership School

The Leadership School was founded in 2022 by Dr. Kimberly Townsend. Dr. Townsend defied odds and a tremendous amount of opposition by opening the first charter school in St. Louis County. While Missouri law states that charter schools can only open and operate within STL or KC city limits (or now in Boone County), Dr. Townsend was able to open The Leadership School in Normandy, an area just north of the St. Louis City limits because the Normandy School District lost their accreditation in 2014. This was a significant milestone in the future of education in the St. Louis area. Most of the school districts in North St. Louis County, the area in which Normandy falls, have lower proficiency rates than St. Louis Public Schools and Kansas City Public Schools in both English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics. See the table below:

2023 – 2024 State Exam Data	ELA Proficiency Rate	Math Proficiency Rate
Missouri State	43.1% Proficient	41.1% Proficient
<b>St. Louis Public School District</b>	<b>21.1% Proficient</b>	<b>17.3% Proficient</b>
Kansas City School District	25.2% Proficient	21.3% Proficient
North County - STL Districts		
Normandy Schools Collaborative	12.6% Proficient	9% Proficient
Riverview Gardens School District	12.5% Proficient	4.2% Proficient
Hazelwood School District	24.6% Proficient	15.3% Proficient
Ferguson-Florissant School District	19.6% Proficient	15.8% Proficient
Jennings School District	18.8% Proficient	16.5% Proficient

Given this academic data, and the fact that nearly 100% of the students in these districts qualify for the Free/Reduced Lunch program, providing families in North St. Louis County with choice and options when it comes to where they send their children to school is paramount. For many of the families in North County, their only option is to send their child to their local neighborhood school.

After only two years of operation, The Opportunity Trust, the Missouri Charter School Commission, and other National Funders were faced with a difficult decision of whether to keep the doors open to the first and only Charter School outside of St. Louis City or Kansas City in the state of Missouri. The Leadership School struggled in just about every area for the first two years. It faced tremendous challenges in student enrollment, financial sustainability, staffing, academic results, and facility planning. The school was placed on the financially distressed list by the state in their first year when their fund balance fell below 3%. TLS also received a letter of concern from the state because their math scores fell below the Normandy Schools in their first year of state testing. There was also no financial or operational plan to expand the facilities in which the school had outgrown. The weight of closing the first charter school outside of city limits inspired the schools' board, their sponsor and their funders to seek new leadership.

Six months into our journey to open a new and innovative charter school, we were approached and presented with the option of applying to be the next leaders of The Leadership School instead of launching a new charter school in the city. By February of 2024, we were hired by the Board of Directors and began planning for the turnaround of The Leadership School where we would begin leading in July.

## Turning Around and Growing The Leadership School

This would be no small feat. We often say that TLS is a turn-around and start-up school, both of which are tricky to do effectively. There were a lot of things that needed to be flipped on their head to turn TLS into a high-performing and financially sustainable school. We also knew that there was no other option. The Leadership School has a great deal riding on its success as the first charter school option in North County.

Before the next school year would begin we needed to find additional funding options to sustain the growth of the school, increase enrollment by a significant amount, create and execute on a facility plan that would allow us to house an additional 100 students the next year, develop an instructional plan that would account for the years of learning loss the students had experienced at the school, and recruit and hire a team of leaders and teachers that were willing to embark on this incredibly difficult journey with us. If any one of these endeavors were not done effectively, the school would be at jeopardy of closing its doors before the school year even began.

The first big win for us came in March when we applied for and were awarded with a 3-year 2-million-dollar CSP grant. This money has helped us furnish new classrooms and learning spaces, offset some of the leaders' salaries, equip our classrooms with technology, and provide coaching and development for our leaders and teachers. We also were able to change our financial destiny by focusing heavily on retaining the

current families, actively recruiting 50 new kindergarteners, and back-filling the 50 open seats the school was not able to fill in the prior years.

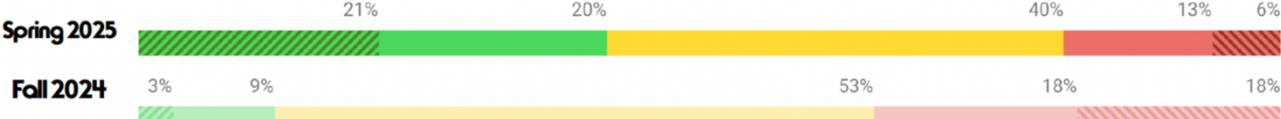
When we stepped into lead the school in July of 2024, the school had a 4.5% fund balance, 18 days of cash on hand, and many bills that had gone unpaid because the school did not have the cashflow to pay them. By securing the CSP grant funding, exceeding our budgeted enrollment goal by 12%, and maintaining a conservative budget, we were able to increase our fund balance to a healthy 15%, and 58 days of cash on hand by the end of that first fiscal year. This year we have continued the upward momentum by exceeding our enrollment goals and carrying a waitlist in 4/6 of our grade-levels. We are projecting to end the year with a 20% fund balance and 71 days of cash on hand.

The renovated warehouse that The Leadership School was using as their campus is about 10,000 square feet, contained only 8 classrooms, and virtually no office space. With our new enrollment of 225 students, the space per student using just this building would have equated to about 45 ft<sup>2</sup> per student. It is recommended that school facilities accommodate between 80 and 100 square feet per student. We would also need at least 2 additional classrooms to accommodate our 10 classes of students. When we started planning for the change in leadership, there had been no work done to expand the facility space of the school for the next year. This left us with an extremely tight timeline to figure out a plan and get moving on it. Because of the tight timeline and a lack of financial resources, we began the process of preparing our site for two trailers containing 2 classrooms each. We leveled the land where the trailers would be placed, and had the trailers outfitted with water, plumbing, and electricity. This was not the optimal space for elementary students to learn, but we made the best of it for one year, while we began planning for the renovation of the second warehouse on the property. Early in our first year, we began the process of planning for our next facility expansion and what our long-term plan was to accommodate a K-8 school. With the renovation of the second warehouse, we doubled the amount of learning space by adding 7 additional classrooms and several office spaces. While this project was extremely successful, and we now have an appropriate amount of space for our students, we will be out of space again next school year when we grow to an additional grade-level and possibly add a Pre-K classroom.

Having a runway from February to July before we stepped in as the leaders gave us the opportunity to get into classes and observe instruction. What we saw was bleak. The turnover rate was over 50%. Some of the classes had a rotation of subs that served as their teacher. Some classes had a consistent teacher, but very little learning was happening, and the teacher was not being developed. Some classes were downright unsafe for students to be in. After offering positions to two of the teachers who were managing to hold it down in their classrooms despite the chaos surrounding them and identifying one staff member that was not in the right seat, but was valuable to the team, we had our work cut out for us to build our team. In March, we began the process of recruiting and hiring 10 – 12 new teachers and building an entirely new leadership team. In today's market of educators this would prove to be the most difficult part of our work. We worked tirelessly to get in front of prospective educators, to tap into our network and connections, and to start a marketing campaign to attract high-quality candidates. We were extremely successful at securing some of the best talent in the area to come teach, lead, and help us build the first charter school in St. Louis County. What is more impressive is that 100% of that staff that was asked to return for the next school year did so.

Part of building a high-quality school is designing exceptional instructional systems to ensure the highest-quality learning is taking place. This was especially important for our school because our students had been neglected academically for the prior two years. We took an innovative approach to designing our teachers' days. We over hired our teaching staff by adding 2 additional teachers, which allows us to provide our ELA

and Math teachers with 2.5 hours of planning, coaching, or professional development each day. This compares to the typical school’s 1 hour of planning time. We departmentalized all of our grade levels so that teachers could become true content experts and do the deep planning that is required to teach excellent lessons. We also partnered with Teach St. Louis, a program in which 6 of our teachers receive additional coaching and take evening/summer classes at Wash-U to earn their master’s degrees in two years. This has led to phenomenal growth in our teachers and the learning that is taking place in the classrooms. In the first year, our 4<sup>th</sup> graders increased from an 18% proficiency rate in ELA on the state test when they were in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to a 29% proficiency rate in their 4<sup>th</sup> grade year. On our iReady benchmark assessments that we use to measure student growth 3 times throughout the year, we increased the percent of students who are reading on grade level from 12% to 41%, while decreasing the students 2 or more years behind in reading from 36% to 19%



*The Leadership School also increased the average percentile of our little readers by 12.5 percentile points on the NWEA assessment!!*

We increased the percent of students on or above grade-level in math from 2% in the Fall to 19% in the Spring, while also decreasing the percent of student 2 or more years behind grade-level from 46% to 23%.



While this growth is truly impressive, we still have a long way to go. In the next five years, we will exceed the state average in ELA and Math proficiency and will ensure that our students leave us in 8<sup>th</sup> grade ready for a rigorous high school and college experience. We are not only paving the way for our students at TLS, but also for all of the students and families in North County. Our success will open the doors for other charters to open in or expand to the North County area and provide all families with choice when it comes to where they choose to send their students to school.