

## St. Louis Schools Chief Finds a Formula

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ST. LOUIS—Five years ago, students in the public-school system here were almost as likely to drop out as earn a diploma. School-board meetings routinely devolved into shouting matches, with a board member once pouring a pitcher of ice water over an administrator's head.

Then, the state of Missouri stepped in, stripped the district's accreditation and installed a new board to run the schools. That board hired Kelvin Adams, an unpretentious leader who had spent the previous 18 months as the chief of staff of the New Orleans Recovery School District, which had been created by the state to transform the hurricane-ravaged schools.

Since taking over here, Mr. Adams has lifted the high-school graduation rate by 18 percentage points and eliminated \$25 million in debt. Attendance is up and misbehavior is down. State test scores are still painfully low—about three-quarters of elementary-school students can't read or do math at grade level—but the progress on tests was enough to persuade state officials last month to grant the district provisional accreditation.

The turnaround is grounded in using data to drive every decision and getting the best leaders and teachers in schools. Students now take standardized math and reading exams three times a year, and Mr. Adams insists principals craft proposals—delivered to him—that detail plans to boost scores in each classroom. He holds principals accountable for the results and has replaced more than half. He also worked with teacher-union leaders to create a mentoring program that aids teachers who struggle, but dismisses those who fail to improve.

"Students can do well in this district with the right kind of focus, direction and oversight," said Mr. Adams, 56 years old, a New Orleans native who dreamed of becoming a defense lawyer, but decided to become a teacher after mentoring teenagers while in college. Sitting in a sparsely furnished room in the district offices, part of his efforts to trim a bloated bureaucracy, he said, "There is still a lot that needs to get done."

The improvements in St. Louis are emblematic of gains in urban districts around the country. While rising test scores in Washington, D.C., New York and New Orleans have gotten attention, the quiet turnaround in St. Louis is more typical of the unheralded progress in certain places, including Boston, Houston and San Diego.

A study released in February by the Council of the Great City Schools showed that urban schools are improving more rapidly on national elementary-school math and reading exams than the nation as a whole. They still post test scores far below national averages, but, between 2003 and 2011, urban districts cut their achievement gap with the rest of the nation by about a third.

Steve Tozer, an education professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and director of the school's program in urban education leadership, said the gains were real but need to be kept in context. "The results can plateau pretty quickly," he said, noting that sustained progress happens only in districts that focus on quality instruction and quality leadership at every school.

Overhauling low-performing districts sometimes gets bogged down by fighting between union and district leaders, or pushback from parents and community activists. In Chicago, for example, Mayor Rahm Emanuel's efforts to overhaul schools led to a two-week teacher strike and sparked continuing demonstrations against proposed school closings.

Mr. Adams, coming in under the authority of the state takeover, had strong backing from the state-appointed school board. He described his relationship with the unions as a "marriage, where I sometimes have to sleep on the couch."

Byron Clemens, a vice president with the St. Louis teachers union, said Mr. Adams made clear that decisions would be transparent, collaborative and based on data. He said Mr. Adams let local and national union leaders comb through budget documents to ensure money was not being "squirreled away" to avoid raises; displayed school

records, down to monthly utility bills, to show parents why under-enrolled schools needed to be closed; and agreed to add 800 preschool slots after teachers collected reams of data to show the need.

Teachers, principals and students say they feel a new energy. "People at this school talk about college," said Byron Haynes, 17, a senior at College Preparatory High School, a new school. "We never talked about that before."

But there are gargantuan challenges ahead in a city facing a 10% unemployment rate and a high violent-crime rate, just as there were in New Orleans post-Katrina.

"From the academic standpoint, we haven't done anything transformational yet," said Build-A-Bear Workshop Inc. BBW 0.00% founder and Chief Executive Maxine Clark, who helped bring Mr. Adams to the district.

Mr. Adams said his 18 months as chief of staff in New Orleans, where he oversaw the opening of 33 traditional schools and 26 charter schools, convinced him that choice and competition are vital. "It puts people on notice that public schools won't necessarily have kids in them just because they are there," he said. Now, he continually warns principals that if they cannot keep enrollment up, he will close the schools.

In his first two years in St. Louis, Mr. Adams closed 14 schools, dismissed about 10% of principals and has since replaced about 60% of the system's 77 leaders. He has transformed 11 schools by firing half the teaching staff and installing new principals.

He hired a human-resources manager to train principals on documenting teacher performance to overcome historically poor record-keeping that made it tough to remove ineffective educators. Last year, 178 of 2,026 teachers received the lowest ranking and were given 18 weeks to improve. Forty-three resigned or were fired.

During a weekly data meeting with top staff, Mr. Adams grilled them about high suspension rates. A staffer complained they needed more school counselors, and Mr. Adams shot back politely but sternly: "Just because you put out more students, doesn't mean I'll give you more services," he said.

Nancy Briggs, an algebra teacher at Vashon High School, a low-achieving campus where the principal and half the staff were replaced in 2010, traversed her classroom recently giving one-on-one help to freshmen and sophomores. Previously, students would have been promoted regardless of whether they understood algebra. Now, they retake the class and get extra help.

"The dynamic has changed to where all our focus is on making sure students get the skills they need," said Ms. Briggs, who remained through the overhaul.