

Growing Quality and Adapting to Challenges



In the late 1990s, two management consultants, Eric Adler and Raj Vinnakota, were introduced to each other and found they shared a passion for improving the educational opportunities of young people in low income communities. Both independently had the same idea about how to make it happen. “There are boarding schools for privileged kids, why not for the ones who need them the most?” Vinnakota recalls they asked. So the duo successfully lobbied the U.S. Congress and the Council of the District of Columbia to amend the education budget to provide additional operating funds for boarding charter schools in the District of Columbia. They also obtained a provisional charter from the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board.

IN 1998, THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD

granted a charter to The SEED School of Washington, DC. The same year, the Bank of America committed a \$7.6 million loan to SEED, the largest loan ever made to a U.S. charter school managed by a not-for-profit institution, The SEED Foundation. In 1999, Raj and Eric raised an additional \$4 million in commitments. In 2000, because of these individuals' and foundations' gifts, groundbreaking on the new SEED school campus was possible.

By 2003, the SEED School of Washington, DC was at full capacity with 320 students. Over \$20 million had been raised to expand the campus to its full size and grow the student body to its capacity, which also ensured that the public revenues from local and federal funds met the operating expenses and debt service requirements for the school. In 2004, SEED welcomed its first graduating class, 100 percent of whom were admitted to college. The school continued to grow.

The SEED Foundation had plans to expand and open another school in the District as well as in other areas. But things did not go as planned.

The Challenge

At the time of the VPP investment, SEED was on a trajectory for moderate growth. Based on the initial success of its first school, Adler and Vinnakota were hoping to eventually open one more campus in Washington, DC to serve an additional 600 students on top of the 300 it was serving at its original campus. It also sought to fully demonstrate its educational model, identify additional financial and delivery models, and demonstrate that SEED could successfully expand.

“There are boarding schools for privileged kids, why not for the ones who need them the most?”

Raj Vinnakota, Co-Founder and Managing Director of the SEED Foundation

In June 2005, SEED entered into a four-year investment partnership with Venture Philanthropy Partners. VPP agreed to invest \$2 million. Initially the investment was focused on:

- Helping SEED reach its aspiration to triple the number of students attending a college prep boarding school in the National Capital Region;

- Refining and embracing the SEED school model and outcomes;
- Defining the range of funding models for urban boarding schools and supportive nonprofit services, all of which are capital intensive; and
- Giving SEED greater capacity to expand into other states where legislation has been passed to support charter schools.

The Action

Planning

As with all VPP investments in the first portfolio, the SEED investment began with business planning facilitated by an external consultant. This planning process focused on six strategic areas: management team and staff capacity, outcomes, financing, facilities and site location/expansion, the boarding school model, and change management.

Adler and Vinnakota recall that they were resistant to the planning process initially.

“We had just done a strategic study ourselves a year earlier. We felt like it might be good to revisit to make sure it hadn't gone stale, but we really felt that it was good guidance. We didn't want to spend too much on the study since we had a pretty good idea of where we wanted to go. We felt and wanted to

save the resources for expansion and other things. However, VPP convinced us to move forward with another study, so we did,” said Adler.

“SEED had very sophisticated founders, who had the same kind of background as the [planning consultants] and that created some tension. The [founders] were good fundraisers but they had not developed the school level operations and infrastructure that would move the school to the next level. The VPP process forced us to confront those gaps,” said Ken Slaughter, who served on the boards of both SEED and VPP.

For Adler and Vinnakota, the planning process was not the most valuable piece of the VPP investment. But they do acknowledge that VPP asked important and tough questions that helped guide their thinking and revealed areas of improvement.

Switching Gears

During the planning process, Adler and Vinnakota were actively pursuing opportunities to build a second campus in DC and were exploring options in Maryland. However, plans for a second campus in DC hit a snag after the organization bumped up against political and community opposition to the proposed location for their second campus.



“After the [planning process], there were a couple of things that became clear. One of them was that VPP had significant focus on growth, and we had an expectation that we were going to grow on another campus in DC and going down path to do a school in MD. We fully expected that campus two would happen faster in DC than in Maryland. However, we hit some political roadblocks in DC and we were all in agreement that the right thing to do was to back off the second campus in DC,” said Adler.

At that point both VPP leaders and Adler and Vinnakota recall that the investment reached a turning point. Since a good part of the investment opportunity

that VPP had seen was the expansion in the National Capital Region of the SEED model, there was a question as to whether it made sense to continue the investment in SEED now that there would not be a second DC campus in the immediate future. SEED founders encouraged VPP to redirect its investment towards the efforts in Maryland, which would serve children throughout the state including some (Montgomery County and Prince George’s County) that fell within the VPP region. However, VPP opted not to go in that direction since the focus of its investments was the Washington Metropolitan Region and Baltimore (the proposed physical location of the school) was outside of that scope.

David Sylvester, the VPP partner who oversaw the investment at that time, says that at this point the investment, “shifted from the aspiration of a new school to an equally important focus on perfecting the academic and residential model.” The planning process surfaced a number of areas of improvement that could lead to improved outcomes for students.

There would be growth but it was in quality of the program – not in numbers of students served and the opening of new campuses.

“If you got the quality right then replication would be better,” said VPP President Carol Thompson Cole.

“A lesson from this investment is flexibility—it started as one thing and moved to another. We had to turn the ship and change where we and VPP were spending our time to provide the most help,” Vinnakota recalls.

An Assault on Quality

With the shift in focus, SEED and VPP began, as Adler put it, “an all out assault on quality: that meant a new head

of school, real focus on measurement, and a willingness to provide support of the program and to scrap and re-think some things.”

Art Curry, an educational consultant who had held senior management positions in the DC and Prince George’s County Public Schools and who works closely with VPP on many of its education investments, noted that there were several areas that needed improvement.

“The focus was now on the DC school—its delivery system and its program that included the relationship between the academic and the residential programs and helping SEED improve its relationship within the political community,” Curry said.

The SEED School of Washington had had three Heads of School in a seven-year period. When the third moved on, SEED decided to redefine the role of head of school and then to find the very best person possible to fill that role.

Part of the reason for the turnover at the Head of School level, according to Vinnakota and others, was multiple staffing and resource issues. “Prior to this shift, nine people reported to the Head of School from facilities, to development, to legal, to the principal, to the Charter School Board liaison, etc., and the workload was crushing,” he said.

With VPP support, the SEED School was able to hire a Managing Director to take on many of the administrative burdens that had been part of the Head of School job. The VPP support also funded work in the area of governance.



Attracting the Right Leader

As SEED undertook this restructuring to add capacity, it also undertook a national search to find the right person to lead the school. The search committee—led by Adler, SEED School chair Vasco Fernandes, SEED School vice-chair Lisa Bernstein and SEED Foundation COO Pyper Davis—was extremely thoughtful about selecting the right person for the Head of School position, knowing that he or she would need to perfectly fit the unique role of leading an innovative, college-preparatory boarding school.

The search led them to Charles Adams.

Adams has the soul of an artist. He doesn't paint, sculpt or play music. Rather, his muse is 300 middle and high school students and his canvas is the SEED School.

Adams is determined to prove that the 24-hour-a-day public college preparatory school model works in getting kids to college and keeping them there. He has brought to the task an artist's intense passion and creativity. He draws outside the lines, experiments with new approaches, pushes the boundaries and is never satisfied.

"If I had more heart and less direction, I would have been an artist. But

I always used to tell my mother, even when I was a little kid, that the best people in the world are kids and old people. I knew for a long time that I wanted to work with kids. I just didn't know how," he says.

"We are on a pursuit for absolute excellence and nothing less, because the families who entrust us with their kids deserve nothing less. Until all of our students graduate from SEED and then go on to graduate from college, we simply won't be satisfied."

Raj Vinnakota, Co-Founder and Managing Director of the SEED Foundation

His path to a career in education was hardly a straight one. After earning a degree in economics and marketing at the University of Pennsylvania, he enrolled in law school at Howard University. However, Adams knew that he didn't want to practice and found his way into teaching after a stint at Americorps right after law school. While all his friends were taking high paying

jobs at law firms, he was driving vans of young people around in Washington, DC and loved it.

He returned to his hometown of New York City and got a job teaching social studies in the city's public schools and later coordinated programs for students. At the urging of his superintendent, Adams participated in the New Leaders for New Schools program where he says he "found the language of education."

He returned to the public schools as an assistant principal and then a principal. He had found his calling. As the principal of a small middle school in the storm of reform led by Mayor Bloomberg, Charles was immersed in change. The school went from an application-only satellite academy to a stand-alone true middle school that served all students (regardless of incoming achievement level) and did so well.

After nine years in the New York City Public School System, however, Adams was ready for a change. He was frustrated by the bureaucracy of the system, and he and his wife wanted to get out of New York. His timing couldn't have been better. As it turned out, Adams and SEED were a good match.

Curry and a couple of members on the screening committee were con-

cerned that Adams hadn't had enough administrative experience.

Adams recalls his selection process being quite rigorous and thorough and likened the process to a "Senate confirmation hearing." But he was intrigued.

"SEED was very attractive to me. There was the audacity of an urban college prep boarding school in this low-income neighborhood. I saw the potential in SEED," said Adams. The model, he says, addressed many of the frustrations and roadblocks he'd encountered in the public school system: It provided more time with students with its 24-hours-a-day approach; it had terrific facilities, and it offered autonomy and no bureaucracy or red tape to cut through.

In the end, Adams' vision, passion, intelligence, and energy won the day and the doubts that Curry and others may have had evaporated once Adams arrived on campus and got to work.

Building a Plane that Could Fly Further

Adams' impression when he arrived was that like many organizations, SEED was flying the plane while they were still building it. For his first three weeks, he made it a point to understand the terrain of the school. He talked to people at all levels of the school—teachers,

administrative staff, residential staff, and students.

"It's like peeling back the layers of the onion and sometimes you cry. I had inherited many good things but we had work to do," he says.

Some of the work that had to be done included:

- Reducing student attrition. While it was true that those students who made it to the senior year graduated and went on to four year colleges, far too many students were leaving SEED well before their senior year and going back to neighborhood or other schools.
- Reaching students at a younger age to ensure that they were adequately prepared for a rigorous high school college prep program; and,
- Strengthening the core curriculum and increasing reading and math scores.

Reducing Turnover

It didn't take Adams very long to see that there was a huge gap between the academic faculty who were there during the day and the residential staff who worked with the students in the afternoon and evening. The two teams operated in silos and didn't communicate well so there was often little coordination between the work the students

did during the day and the homework and additional learning that would take place after the formal school day ended. There were also disparities in stature between the academic faculty and the residential staff, all of which created tension and contributed to the high turnover rates. In addition, the instability among the staff also contributed to the high attrition rates among SEED students.

Adams realized that he had to address the disparities between the two staffs. This would involve structural changes and creating a whole new culture. Vinnakoda, Adler, Davis, and others at the SEED foundation partnered with and supported Adams to restructure the school.

Working with the SEED Foundation's leadership team, Adams reorganized the school, which included hiring a new Director of Student Life. He also sought to create greater synergies between the academic faculty and the student life staff by grouping the two teams around a cohort of students. The two teams now work together around a specific group of students, such as 10th grade boys. Adams elevated the role of the residential staff and has facilitated the two staffs to work as a team—focusing on what's best for their students.

“Students should not receive an excellent education solely based on the professional work ethic and personality of a particular staff member. We had to create structural and systemic approaches for both groups to work together. We pushed hard and deliberately into this synergy work. Instead of engineering around a struggling staff member, we are trying to share data, best practices and institutional memory for the benefit of our young people.”

Charles Adams, Head of the SEED School of Washington DC

“Students should not receive an excellent education solely based on the professional work ethic and personality of a particular staff member. We had to create structural and systemic approaches for both groups to work together,” Adams said. “We pushed hard and deliberately into this synergy work. Instead of engineering around a struggling staff member, we are trying

to share data, best practices and institutional memory for the benefit of our young people. They need us to form teams around and for them. I didn’t realize how much I enjoyed working at the systems level and creating structures that respect individuals,” he said.

He also instituted frequent “State of the School” sessions during which he articulates and reiterates the vision for where the school is going and how they are going to get there. These meetings are mandatory for everyone in the school. All hands on deck. He encourages free and open discussions of the issues facing the school and

sends a clear signal that good ideas can come from anywhere.

During the first year, Adams says some people left. But in subsequent years, staff and student turnover has declined dramatically. Since Adams’ arrival student attrition has declined 75%.

“To have someone of Charles’ caliber be the leader of the school has changed so much. Charles focused on the adults in the building as well as the children. SEED had gotten good people before but Charles really understands how to educate urban youth and was willing to make the kind of changes to elevate the level of the school,” Sylvester says.



Improving Academic Success

Another significant change that SEED made was bringing students into the school earlier, a long-desired action on the part of the founders.

“We are urban and public as much as we are college prep. We have to take whoever comes to us wherever they are when they meet us,” Adams said. Students came in with varying levels of proficiency in reading and math and needed remedial courses to build their proficiency for a rigorous college prep program.

Originally, students enrolled at SEED in the 7th grade. But after reviewing data and talking with staff, SEED realized that they weren’t starting early enough. This realization came at a good time. DCPS, under the leadership of Michelle Rhee, began to shift its elementary and middle schools. As a result, SEED began taking students in the 6th grade to allow more time to prepare students for the rigors of the high school program.

Adams also looked at strengthening reading and math programs by adding math coaches to help students and teachers better negotiate the math curricula. The new leadership added the Read 180 program because he felt it was better suited to the needs of the students at SEED.

Measuring Results

A critical aspect of SEED’s quest for improved quality was to track and analyze its results. Adams and his team have created the infrastructure to monitor student progress across a range of educational and other standards. With the VPP support, the SEED Foundation hired a manager to oversee the outcome tracking and analysis at both the SEED School of Washington and its second school in Maryland. Adams worked closely with this manager to create indicators of success—both in terms of academics and in terms of management of the school. SEED ensures that everyone is accountable for results. Adams is committed to tracking results and using the data to guide the school’s direction and decision making.

Governance and Management

The VPP investment provided support that allowed the SEED Foundation and the SEED School Boards to better define their relationship and establish a clear reporting structure for the Head of School. The SEED Foundation Board is responsible for fundraising and overseeing the portfolio of SEED Schools, which today includes the SEED School of Washington and the SEED School of Maryland in Baltimore. The Head of

School is now accountable solely to the SEED School Board of Trustees. In addition, there was work to further develop the SEED School Board to include more people with educational backgrounds and experience.

“A lesson from this investment is flexibility—it started as one thing and moved to another. We had to turn the ship and change where we and VPP were spending our time to provide the most help.”

Raj Vinnakota, Co-Founder and Managing Director of the SEED Foundation

“There was no doubt that we needed to clarify the relationship between the Foundation and the school boards, and VPP pushed us to do so. We started this clarification process with SEED School of Maryland and the SEED Foundation Board and we used that as a template that we modified to make the reporting relationship clearer in DC,” Vinnakota said.

Working Side by Side for Improvement

Adams believes that VPP helped give him the tools he needed to do his job.

These included the funding for the Managing Director position, creating a good system for data analysis to track progress and providing leadership coaching. But perhaps most valuable to him was the mentorship and support he received from Curry and Sylvester.

“This was my first introduction to a funder like VPP. VPP put Dave and Art in my life and I trusted [them]. David was someone for me to bounce ideas off of. Art always made himself available to me and would drop these nuggets of wisdom. They asked tough

questions and helped me as I was thinking through strategies. I love smart people and VPP brings smart folks to the table and helps make people — like me — smarter,” Adams said.

While the investment has ended, Adams and Sylvester still meet once a month for breakfast.

SEED co-founder Eric Adler agrees that finding and supporting the right leader has been pivotal to the success of the SEED School and that VPP helped make this successful.

“Attracting the right leader was both a matter of getting strategic input

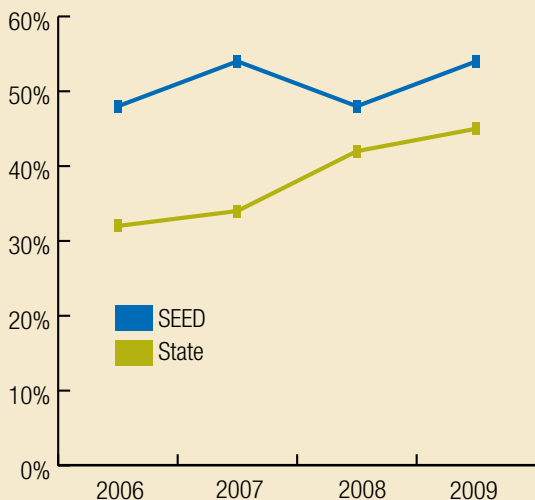
and guidance and, frankly, money. It was about knowing that several years of funding were in place to grow the development function to bring in a new leader and some of the other positions,” he said.

Results

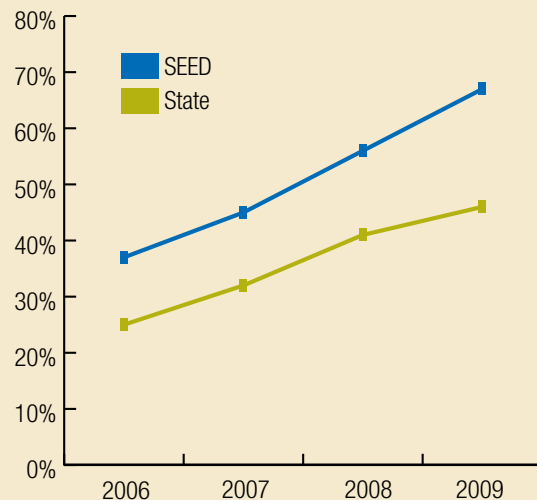
Stability and Strength of the SEED School

The SEED School continues to grow and evolve. Perhaps the biggest result of the VPP investment is the strength and stability of the SEED School of Washington and the SEED Foundation.

2006-2009 - Students Proficient & Advanced in Reading Compared to State



2006-2009 - Students Proficient & Advanced in Math Compared to State





Student attrition and staff turnover rates at the SEED School are substantially reduced.

STUDENT ATTRITION RATES

Year	Number of Students Who Did Not Re-Enroll
2004	92
2005	104
2006	101
2007	64
2008	47
2009	41
2010	25

Student attrition rates have declined dramatically from 101 students in 2006 to 25 in 2010. Eighty percent of all middle school students and 90 percent of all upper school students have decided to re-enroll in The SEED School in 2009, the last year of the VPP investment.

At the SEED Foundation there is a strong development staff and its relationship to the school is clearly defined and working well.

Educational Progress

The numbers measuring progress in reading and math continue to improve.

Between 2006 and 2009, the number of students measuring proficient or advanced in math increased by 30%. Advances in reading during the same time increased modestly by 5%.

“Our numbers are moving in the right direction but we have more work to do,” Adams says.

“Our goals in the short term are to improve the opportunities and chances for individual kids. The SEED investment is a success because during the investment period SEED and its leadership have helped improve many lives.”

David Sylvester, VPP Partner

Better Hiring Practices

One of the things that the VPP investment provided was professional development around hiring practices, which has not only benefitted The SEED School of Washington but the SEED Foundation and The SEED School of Maryland.

“I don’t know if VPP would consider this part of their success but we do. The first year on the Maryland campus

we hired 45 staff and faculty and after the first year every one of them wanted to stay. We had better hiring practices in Maryland. We had made enough mistakes in DC and we recognized those mistakes so we didn't repeat them," said Adler.

Quality Matters

Co-founders Adler and Vinnakota, Adams, and VPP all believe the switch in focus from expansion to increasing quality was productive and has had great benefit.

"The earlier portion [of the VPP investment] – the business planning portion – wasn't entirely successful for us and we went through a period where we and VPP struggled with each other. However, from the moment the focus turned from quantity to quality, things became extremely productive. We took a real hard look at quality and we very successfully ratcheted up the quality of our program. That was a big success," Adler says.

"The changes we made weren't temporary and weren't just for the sake of the partnership with VPP. They are part of our organization. The ability to continue these changes was reinforced by the partnership," Adams says.

"Our goals in the short term are to improve the opportunities and chances

for individual kids. The SEED investment is a success because during the investment period SEED and its leadership have helped improve many lives," said Sylvester.

"We are on our way to having a strong community of adults and young people. I am extremely proud of our leadership. We have to finish the things that we have started and we must continue to recognize the sense of urgency in the work we do."

Charles Adams, Head of the SEED School of Washington DC

A Work in Progress

While Vinnakota, Adler, and Adams are proud of the successes the SEED team has achieved in the three years that he has been Head of School, they are not completely satisfied.

"We are on a pursuit for absolute excellence and nothing less, because the families who entrust us with their kids deserve nothing less," said Vinnakota. "Until

KEY INFORMATION

- > Investment duration:
2005 – 2009
 - > **\$2,000,000** invested
 - > **329** students served
- > Revenue increased from **\$10.5 to \$20.6 million** during investment period
 - > **\$65,000** leveraged funding
 - > **1** new school in Baltimore

all of our students graduate from SEED and then go on to graduate from college, we simply won't be satisfied."

For Adams, the vision of where he wants the school to be is still a work in progress. Like the painter who struggles to recreate on canvas what he sees in his mind, Adams continues to push himself, his team and his students to perfect themselves and their school.

"We are on our way to having a strong community of adults and young people. I am extremely proud of our leadership. We have to finish the things that we have started and we must continue to recognize the sense of urgency in the work we do," Adams said.



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