STRAY DOGS, SAINTS, AND SAVIORS

FIGHTING FOR THE SOUL OF AMERICA'S TOUGHEST HIGH SCHOOL

ALEXANDER RUSSO
Praise for *Stray Dogs, Saints, and Saviors*

“Russo’s observation of Locke’s transformation by Green Dot shows that education reform is complex, hard work that can’t be done with a quick fix. Russo weaves together fascinating anecdotes and lively descriptions of the people and events that helped turned Locke from a failing school to one of hope and survival. While I don’t agree with what’s said about the United Teachers of Los Angeles, *Stray Dogs, Saints, and Saviors* is an important addition to the collection of books about making sustainable improvement in our public schools.”

— Randi Weingarten, president, American Federation of Teachers

“For once, in Alexander Russo’s talented hands, school reform is not boring. His book has drama, tension, danger, heartbreak and joy—all played out in what was once one of the worst high schools in America. It will be impossible for you to put it down.”


“Part scholar, part journalist, part urban wayfarer, Alexander Russo aims a bright, unflinching light at the transformation of one of America’s most troubled high schools. He writes with nuance and honesty and—in spite of all the complexities and contradictions—hope.”

— Jesse Katz, Pulitzer-prize winning journalist and author, *The Opposite Field*

“*Stray Dogs, Saints, and Saviors* offers an important, up-close glimpse into school reform’s promise and perils. Alexander Russo threads the needle between healthy appreciation for Green Dot’s impact on improving kids’ lives and hard-nosed skepticism about the ‘new’ Locke’s impact.”

— Greg Toppo, education reporter for *USA Today* and Spencer Education Journalism Fellow
“As public school systems shift their attention to turning-around the nation’s lowest-performing schools, the story of Locke High School is undoubtedly going to serve as a guide of sorts. Alexander Russo gets at the real story—not the feel-good, made-for-television version—and in the process gives us all a solid baseline upon which we can assess the long-term success or failure of Green Dot’s ambitious school turn-around effort. In education reform’s push to make things black and white, Russo shows that the real action is in the gray area.”

—Joe Williams, executive director, Democrats for Education Reform and author, Cheating Our Kids: How Politics and Greed Ruin Education

“A gripping tale of challenge, hope, disappointment, success, scandal and persistence in the school-reform maze, penned by a deft and knowledgeable writer.”

—Chester E. Finn Jr., senior fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University and president, Thomas B. Fordham Institute

“Alexander Russo has penned a remarkable account of one of the decade’s most intriguing school reform efforts. Delightfully, his narrative manages to do justice to the exploits of colorful Green Dot founder Steve Barr, the outsized icon behind the audacious takeover of L.A.’s Locke High School. This is a must-read for educators, policymakers, and parents who wonder what can be done about troubled urban schools.”

—Frederick M. Hess, director of education policy studies, American Enterprise Institute and author, The Same Thing Over and Over

“Like all great social movements in American history, school reform is a story not just of airy principles but of gritty struggles on the ground—of stops and starts, frustrating obstacles and unsatisfying compromise, flesh and blood in the battle to rescue the next generation. Alexander Russo brings it all alive in one high school trying to come back from the dead. This is a compelling view of the most critical domestic issue of our time.”

—Jonathan Alter, author, The Promise: President Obama, Year One
“At a time when the debate on education reform has sunk to finger-pointing and scapegoating, Alexander Russo has provided a welcome corrective. He refuses to give us cartoon villains or saintly heroes. Instead he takes us indelibly and memorably into the struggle to remake a failing school. There’s optimism in this book, but it’s the measured optimism that comes from keen observation and independent thinking.”

—Samuel G. Freedman, professor, Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University and author, *Small Victories: The Real World of a Teacher*

“An insightful and eye-opening analysis of the effort to turnaround Alain Leroy Locke High School; one of America’s most troubled schools. Russo is a great story teller who presents his readers with a vivid and detailed description of the complex issues confronting the school and those who attempt to reform it. *Stray Dogs* is a ‘must read’ for those interested in understanding what it will take to reform urban schools.”

—Pedro Noguera, Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education, New York University and author, *The Trouble with Black Boys*

“Russo’s *Stray Dogs* is a deep-dive into the world of public schools. With tenacity and compassion, Russo brings us into the complicated world of public education, where the stakes are high and the expectations great. Rarely have we been given such a close-up look into the day-to-day struggles of teachers, students, and administrators. One comes away with an appreciation of how hard it is to teach, and to do it right every day.”

—Sudhir Venkatesh, William B. Ransford Professor of Sociology, Columbia University and author, *Gang Leader for a Day*
“An important tale of how a troubled school can be changed and the children who thrive—or not—as a result of thoughtful reform. Russo gets past piety and politics and gives us a valuable look at the people who try, fail and try again to help kids succeed in education.”


“Alexander Russo takes us deep inside a tough urban high school. His book, *Stray Dogs, Saints and Saviors*, demonstrates in lively prose that Green Dot is a lot more than Steve Barr. This is a fast read and a gripping story.”

—John Merrow, education correspondent, PBS NewsHour and author, *Below C Level*

“Writing in a style that combines good investigative reporting with good ethnography, Alexander Russo has produced a powerfully instructive book on a powerfully important topic. The message is that school turnarounds could be a powerful instrument for good, but only if we see through the hype. In vivid detail, Russo demonstrates that it is possible for a dysfunctional school to get better, but the time, money, hard work and smart politicking required are an order of magnitude beyond what many pundits believe.”

—Charles Payne, the Frank P. Hixon Distinguished Service Professor in the School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago and author, *So Much Reform, So Little Change*
STRAY DOGS, SAINTS, AND SAVIORS
To my mother, Jeremy Warburg Russo,
for the love and support she has always provided;
and to my father, William Russo,
for the warmth and creativity he embodied
STRAY DOGS, SAINTS, AND SAVIORS

Fighting for the Soul
of America’s Toughest High School

ALEXANDER RUSSO
Contents

Acknowledgments xi
Character List xiii
Introduction 1

PART ONE Desperate Measures

1 Desperate School Reform Superstar ................................. 9
2 Getting Locke ................................................................. 19
3 Year in Limbo .................................................................. 25
4 Unlikely Leader .............................................................. 33
5 Scrambling for Teachers .................................................. 41
6 The Gate ........................................................................ 49

PART TWO “New” Locke

7 “New” Locke ................................................................. 61
8 Stray Dogs in the Quad ..................................................... 71
9 In the Classroom ............................................................ 83
10 Shocktober ..................................................................... 95
11 Mayall’s Revenge .......................................................... 103
12 Rogue Cops ................................................................. 113
Contents

13 “May”-hem ......................................................... 125
14 Drinks at Prom .................................................. 137
15 Shooting on San Pedro ...................................... 143
16 The New Yorker ................................................ 149
17 “We Did It, Y’All” ............................................. 155

PART THREE Becoming a School

18 The New Face of Green Dot ............................... 167
19 Barr Steps Down ............................................. 175
20 Turnaround Fever ............................................. 183
21 Doing It All Over Again ..................................... 191
22 Becoming a School ........................................... 199
23 Firing Everyone ............................................... 207
24 Always a Saint ................................................. 215

Epilogue ......................................................... 223
Selected Sources ............................................... 229
About the Author ............................................... 233
Index .......................................................... 235
It goes without saying that this book would not have been possible without the participation and candor of everyone at Green Dot and at Locke High School, including both those whose roles are described prominently in the book and many others whose role in helping the turnaround effort deserves more attention than it receives here. This includes dean of students Mike Moody; English teachers Maggie Callender, Kevin Sully, Keith Kobylka, Monica Stone, and Joshua Berardall; math teachers Fernando Avila, Stephanie Avila, and Peggy Gorsich; campus aide and coach Vic Lopez; science teacher Dennis Stein; Green Dot Education Chief Cristina de Jesus; and many, many others. All deserve credit for sharing their stories for the larger good.

I thank Kate Gagnon, Tracy Gallagher, Lesley Iura, Pamela Berkman, Michele Jones, and everyone else at Jossey-Bass for their interest and support. It’s not easy helping an irascible forty-six-year-old rookie through the book-writing process. I appreciate their assistance and patience at every step of the way. David Lobenstine provided incredibly helpful editing during the development stages. Paula Breen was a great help vetting the legal issues and guiding me through contract negotiations. Maya Stanton was an indefatigable fact checker.

This book would not have been possible without the generous assistance of everyone involved with the Spencer Education
Acknowledgments

Journalism Fellowship at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, including most notably the Spencer Foundation’s Paul Goren and Mike McPherson and Columbia’s Arlene Morgan, LynNell Hancock, Sam Freedman, Jeff Henig, Paula Span, Kevin Coyne, and Nick Lemann. Special thanks to my 2008–2009 Spencer “classmates,” Nancy Solomon and Claudia Wallis.

There are several colleagues, mentors, and betters who have helped me with advice, encouragement, and criticism at key moments during the lengthy process. These include Stephanie Banchero, Greg Toppo, Roland Lange, Peg Tyre, Susan Wallace, John Ayers, Virginia Vitzthum, Jay Mathews, Joel Rubin, Joe Williams, Jonathan Gyurko, Edward Lewine, Amanda Millner-Fairbanks, Stacey Schultz, Donna Foote, Peter Green, John Merrow, Jacob Weisberg, Paul Glastris, and David Zivan. Like they say, I couldn’t have done it without you.

I also express my sincere thanks to colleagues and publications that have supported my work along the way, including Scholastic Administrator (which sponsors my national education blog, This Week in Education) and ChicagoNow (which sponsors District 299, my Chicago schools blog), as well as Catalyst Chicago’s Linda Lenz, EdWeek’s Virginia Edwards and Jeanne McCann, AASA’s Jay Goldman and the Title I Report’s Julie Miller. I appreciate all the collegiality, encouragement, and support over the years—especially the early ones.
Character List

Reggie Andrews: The veteran music teacher (and cowriter of “Let It Whip”) is “more Locke” than almost anyone else and regards outside do-gooders with understandable wariness.

Steve Barr: A latecomer to school reform, the irascible Barr starts a much-publicized network of Los Angeles charter schools but knows that charter schools and newsclips aren’t enough.

Veronica (“Ronnie”) Coleman: The forty-something rookie principal from Michigan initially doesn’t want the job running the biggest program at Locke—and some community members don’t want her to have the spot either.

Zeus “Hollywood” Cubias: A math teacher who graduated from Locke in 1992, the glib El Salvadoran becomes the public face of the “new” Locke despite his ambivalence about “the Dot.”

David: The good-looking senior used to get good grades but now spends so much time in trouble that he’s become a major source of disagreement among the administrators in charge of his fate, each of whom have tried and failed to help him.

Emily Kaplowitz: Guidance counselor extraordinaire, “Miss K” is instrumental in helping get the new school organized and keeping it afloat, but sometimes advocates for students so hard that she runs into conflicts with colleagues.
Monica Mayall: New to Locke but one of the most experienced teachers at the new school, the veteran art and drama teacher is dismayed at Green Dot’s lapses and becomes the union rep for the school.

Mike Moody: The well-dressed, stern-faced former Division I football player is in charge of working with misbehaving students but is trying to do so without harsh disciplinary measures. Cubias calls him “Reverend” for his snazzy dress and fastidious, churchgoing ways.

Lieutenant Alex Moore: The heavyset security guard is in charge of keeping the school and surrounding streets safe for kids and teachers, but not everyone is confident that the “LT” is up to the job (or happy having armed guards posted all around the campus).

Marco Petruzzi: The slender, Italian-born Petruzzi spent fifteen years as an international business consultant and left a partnership at Bain & Company to join Green Dot, eventually becoming Barr’s successor as CEO.

Ricky: Smart, mistrustful and angry at kids and adults alike, Ricky is one of the many kids who gets caught up in the violence that overwhelms the school one sunny day at the end of lunch and has to figure out if he can abide by all the new rules and regulations long enough to graduate.

Bruce Smith: The cerebral English teacher is one of the first to see the advantages of bringing Green Dot into Locke and ends up being instrumental in making that a reality, but what role, if any, he’ll have with Green Dot is uncertain.

Frank Wells: Appointed to take over Locke in 2004, the soft-spoken principal is the catalyst for the turnaround of Locke and hopes to help Green Dot revive the school.
Map of Locke High School

1. Big Locke White Shirts
2. Big Locke Black Shirts
3. The Quad
4. The Baby Lockes
5. The Saint Street Gate
6. Green Dot Home Office
7. Teachers’ Union Headquarters
8. Downtown Los Angeles
9. School District HQ/Central Office
It was just a month after the massive May 2008 brawl that shut down Alain Leroy Locke High School and made national news that I first visited the sprawling Watts campus, heading down the 110 Freeway to meet school reformer Steve Barr and tour the hallways. The light-blue paint on the outside walls was faded and patched. A twenty-five-foot-high fence surrounded the campus, looking like something you’d see in a prison or at a border crossing rather than a school. The burned-out press box above the football field resembled a guard tower. A big blue wall had been erected along the east side of campus in the wake of a student’s shooting death. And yet, the place didn’t feel particularly dangerous.

Waved in through the front gate by a yellow-jacketed campus aide, Barr and I strolled the near-empty halls and sunny walkways, chatting about the process that—nearly a year before—had culminated in Locke teachers voting to hand the school over to Barr’s nonprofit charter school organization, Green Dot Public Schools. As usual, Barr was dressed casually, wearing an untucked polo shirt a baseball cap pulled low over his blue eyes.

Even before the campuswide melee that brought riot police and TV helicopters to the campus, it had been an awful year for Locke and a difficult transition for Green Dot. “We did this thing entirely ass-backwards,” said Barr, standing near the gate
where much of the fighting had taken place. Now, three weeks before graduation, the low-slung buildings already had a sleepy, off-season feeling to them. Hundreds of students had dropped out during the course of the year, and many more had been told not to come back after the violence. Graffiti “tags” were everywhere—as were pasty-looking district administrators sent out from their cubicles to patrol the campus for the rest of the year and prevent any repeat fighting. All of the neglect and lethargy were supposed to change on July 1, when the school district officially handed the campus and all it contained over to Green Dot, and the education world watched to see if Barr’s promise of a dramatically better education for the kids of Watts panned out.

My coming to Locke that day was the culmination of a series of events begun nearly twenty years ago, in the very early 1990s, when as a twenty-something education wonk working in Washington DC, I gradually came to appreciate that the divide between teachers unions and school administrators and charter school advocates was in many ways as deep and entrenched as any partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans. At the beginning of my career, I had assumed that everyone was, generally, on the same side: all Democrats, all focused on education. (This was before Republicans were prominent in education issues, or so it seemed). I interviewed for jobs with union presidents as well as school district administrators, with centrist Democrats and with liberals. But slowly I realized that teachers unions and charter school advocates rarely coexisted peacefully, and that teachers unions and school districts were in many places constantly battling, the Hatfields and McCoys of the education world. Like many, I was ambivalent about this long-running trench warfare going on between them (and their shared enemy, charter schools), all the stalemated finger pointing and speechifying and disjointed
efforts. But then in 2007 I started hearing about something that seemed new—a unionized network of charter schools called Green Dot, and its founder Steve Barr’s unlikely interest in fixing a broken district high school. The school would be converted from a traditional district school into a charter school, but the teachers would still be unionized, and the school would still serve all the kids in the neighborhood. Charter education, unionization, and full-size neighborhood high schools were a rare combination—a rainbow-colored unicorn in the forest. I applied for a Spencer Fellowship in education journalism—a paid year at Columbia University’s journalism school—and decided to follow the story of Green Dot’s attempt to “fix” Locke High School and share the story of what it’s really like to try to do such an unusual and intriguing thing. This book is the result of those efforts.

The “new” Locke opened in September 2008, and it was a pretty exciting thing to see happen—the education version of an Internet start-up or a new Broadway show. Each morning, teachers, office workers, and administrators got to the school in the cool early morning hours to prepare for the start of the day. Then at 8:00 a.m. the kids streamed into the building through the gates and into the classrooms, and the daily performance began. Behind the scenes, office staff and administrators worked to handle any missed cues—missing teachers, after-school events, fights. The kids departed at the end of the day. Then it was time to get ready to do it again. Pretty much everybody was hoping for the best. From Hollywood to the New York Times, unlikely successes have always been a favorite. We all want to believe that transformation is possible; that dire, stubborn situations—be they academic or financial, economic or environmental—can turn dramatically, unexpectedly better, at least some of the time. The possibility of change, after all, is a deep-rooted American narrative. And so everyone wanted to believe that Locke could
happen. I wasn’t any different, a writer looking for a story to tell. I was just there longer than any other outsider.

But were we expecting too much? For years now it’s been noted that American students are wildly overconfident—that too many seem to think that they’re going to be professional athletes or performers or models or billionaires. It’s an easy thing to tut-tut at these fantasies of glory, given how obviously unrealistic they are. But many of us adults hold our own equally unrealistic fantasies, which are arguably just as destructive as those of kids thinking they’re going to be pro ball players. To me the most destructive of all is the expectation that any single person or idea or program can truly fix things for kids, save them reliably and completely. This belief—this adult version of kids’ pro basketball player dreams—is entrenched in popular culture, in the news media, and in school reform circles, usually in the form of “magic bullet” and “secret sauce” stories focused on some special innovation that’s being tried here and there, or “hero” stories in which an individual teacher, principal, reformer, or politician rides to the rescue. I’m not saying that these things haven’t occasionally happened or aren’t worth lauding and attempting to replicate, or that partial successes shouldn’t be admired. But it seems to me that we should all be a little more grown up when we go into anything as difficult as improving schools, that any such efforts should be navigated with full knowledge of the complex, entrenched dynamics that have created the original situation and will challenge any changes. Any occasional successes, minor or miraculous, should be treated as a combination of luck, smarts, and effort that might just as well have failed, or may well falter next month or next year. But that’s not how the results are usually played out, in the media or among reformers. Exceptions somehow become expectations, and then the cycle of disappointment and cynicism grows ever deeper.
The Locke turnaround story was no different. What I found over the two years that followed my first visit was that there were two different stories taking place. The story told in public followed a satisfying narrative of rescue and rebirth, exaggerating both the problems of the “old” Locke and the successes of the new school. Even before the first year was over, journalists and politicians had already declared it a success, a national model. This wasn’t the first time that the media had prematurely glommed onto a promising story, but it was a particularly compact example. And then, just as quickly, the Locke turnaround was belittled as being incomplete (and expensive), and Green Dot’s reputation was marred by internal convulsions despite the reality that the good work on the ground was partial. The teachers and students at Locke lived in their own, almost completely different world in which improvements were slower, less complete, more incremental than anything described publicly; setbacks were frequent and stubborn, and the relationship between the school and the Green Dot home office was sometimes as strained as any traditional school dealing with a central office. This was a much more complicated, uncertain world, but it suffered little from the boom-and-bust narrative going on in the press and among reformers.

Somewhere in between the exaggerated spin cycle and the daily classroom grind was the true story of Locke, where things were slowly but steadily getting better thanks to the hard work and courage of teachers and administrators who spent every day with the kids and did everything they could think of to help them stay in school, pass their classes, graduate, and maybe even go on to college. Hence the title of this book: *Stray Dogs, Saints, and Saviors*. The stray dogs are the mutts that sometimes wandered in from the streets onto campus and into the quad even after the school had been revamped and the quad beautified with trees and grass. They
are the poverty and neglect that Watts has endured for much too long. The saints—Locke’s mascot—are the Locke community, past and present, which has pressed onward even when everyone else has forgotten it. The saviors are those teachers and leaders past and present who have tried to make things better—and put themselves through the wringer in the process.

Now well into its third year, the Locke transformation effort tells us that with tremendously hard work and sacrifice, a broken school can indeed be improved in meaningful ways. But the realities of change—halting and incremental, mostly frustrating and occasionally inspiring—don’t match the desire of funders, policymakers, and the rest of us for simple, speedy success stories. The process of school reform is one of the most vital and least glamorous efforts in education, the unwanted job. The gap between uncertain reality and the smooth public narrative ultimately dooms our efforts at school improvement and chews up those flawed but dedicated individuals who make fixing schools their life’s work.

A word about access and individuals’ names: Though at times they regretted doing so, pretty much everyone at Green Dot gave me nearly complete access to the school and all its inner workings. My only promise was to be fair and to tell the truth. Names of students have been changed to protect their privacy during a particularly vulnerable time of life. Names of additional characters have been omitted in order to avoid distracting the reader. This omission in no way diminishes their contributions. Last but not least, names have also been omitted in a handful of cases where sources asked not to be quoted by name ahead of time as a condition of being interviewed, instances of which are noted in the text. No other names or facts have been changed.

Alexander Russo
Brooklyn, New York
PART ONE

•

DESPERATE MEASURES