

Expanding to Deliver a World-Class Education



After ten years of hard work at Friendship Collegiate Academy — where she graduated, with honors, as salutatorian of her class — I-Sha Davis is now at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, planning to major in **mechanical engineering**. During her senior year at Friendship, I-Sha won the chance to introduce U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Congressman George Miller to a room full of attendees at the New Schools Venture Summit. Davis' success is due to a combination of her talent and ambition—and excellent educational opportunities that were available to her through Friendship Public Charter School.

SUCCESSES LIKE DAVIS' are exactly what Friendship Public Charter School Founder Donald Hense envisioned. Hense burns with a passion to help children and families move out of poverty to a better life. His vision and single-minded pursuit of efforts to help struggling families led to the creation of Friendship Public Charter School. This high-performing school today serves more than 6,000 students from pre-school to 12th grade at six District of Columbia campuses as well as several campuses in Baltimore.

In 1996, Hense became Executive Director of Friendship House, a former settlement house and social services agency in Washington, D.C. that first

opened its doors in 1904. Friendship House helped children and adults with child care, employment-training, and literacy. While Hense admired the work that Friendship was doing, he realized that without engaging the schools, they were “just nibbling around the edges” of poverty. “The failure to graduate from high school denies children access to college, the passport to the middle class,” Hense said.

A new law passed by the District of Columbia in 1996 authorizing charter schools provided an opportunity to expand the “spirit of Friendship House,” the belief that all individuals deserved caring and respect and that community matters. Hense envisioned schools that

would provide a world-class education for students. Long on passion but short on capital to invest in this venture, Friendship teamed up with Edison Schools, a for-profit company created by social entrepreneur Chris Whittle that managed schools across the nation. Edison was prepared to invest in renovating vacant DC school buildings which were available to public

charter schools in 1997 to house four Friendship campuses. Together, Friendship and Edison submitted applications to open two elementary schools in the fall of 1998; a middle school in the fall of 1999; and a high school over two years in 2000 and 2001, enrolling a total of 3,000 students.

In the early years, Friendship schools were achieving promising results—but Hense and his team were not satisfied. They wanted to reach more children. They also were exploring their performance and asking whether they were fully fulfilling their mission to provide a world-class education. They were good but they wanted to be great.

As Hense and his team were examining their progress and their plans for growth, they started talking with Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP). Hense and VPP founder Mario Morino had known each other since the late 1990's, when Friendship was part of the Morino Institute's (the parent organization of VPP) Youth Development Collaborative (YDC) Pilot. YDC tested out some of the high engagement capacity building ideas behind VPP, helping four nonprofits implement a state-of-the-art technology center and curriculum into their after school programs.

Morino and Hense forged a strong bond. In 1998, the two stood outside a



run-down D.C. elementary school and Hense pointed across the street saying, “That’s where we’re going to put our first school” and then outlined his vision for a network of public charter schools to Morino. Morino and Hense stayed in touch after the YDC investment ended. And Friendship remained on VPP’s radar as a nonprofit with clear growth potential. It had a promising model for improving the trajectory of children and was poised for growth.

The Challenge

In 2005, VPP and Friendship entered into a four-year, \$2.9 million investment. Like all VPP investments, this one began with business planning, which led to the creation of a strategic plan for the organization and also provided a road-map for how a VPP investment could provide the greatest value. Facilitated by an outside consultant, the business planning process helped the organization wrestle with the issues of how to grow and the infrastructure that the organization would need to prepare for the growth it sought to achieve. A major issue that emerged from the business planning process was that it would be difficult for Friendship to achieve its ambitious growth and academic goals within the Edison system.

“The timing for the VPP investment was invaluable for Friendship because it made it possible for us to think about how we were deploying resources and to think strategically about our relationship with Edison. The VPP investment was invaluable in putting the resources in place for us to take control of our destiny, to serve our constituencies better, and to build capacity to respond to known needs or needs that weren’t known or projected at the time.”

Patricia Brantley, Friendship COO

Through the business planning process Friendship articulated its aspirations for growth. These aspirations were to expand in several new directions over a three year period and to increase student enrollment to more than 5,000. Other specific aspirations included:

- Consistently improving student performance to meet Adequate Yearly Progress, under the terms of

federal No Child Left Behind legislation, to become the D.C. public school of choice.

- Educating the “whole child” with a wide range of academic and non-academic offerings;
- Expanding impact in terms of both the number of schools and the number of students;
- Widening the portfolio of education options to respond to a range of student needs not being met in Washington, D.C.;
- Building an enduring organization that will outlast all current employees; and
- Proving that large urban public schools can be successful.

The goals of the investment were:

- To support Friendship’s expansion in Washington D.C. to serve approximately 1,500 more students for a total of 5,000 youth by 2010; the increase to be realized by growing student enrollment at its five current campuses.
- To open two more public charter schools: a career academy (tech prep), which would serve 600 students; and the region’s first K-12 International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which would serve 1,100 students at full capacity.

VPP's funding and strategic assistance, was focused on:

- Refining academic programs to invigorate performance.
- Enhancing effectiveness of central management's ability to support schools.
- Continuing to expand its school system.
- Increasing independence from Edison to localize support and shift resources into schools.

Action

Building an Infrastructure Independent of Edison to Support Growth

During the strategic planning process, Friendship's management team examined its goals and how effective they were in delivering on their mission to deliver a high-quality public education to prepare students to succeed in college and life. During the course of that planning, it became clear that Friendship would not be able to deliver that kind of education tailored to its students within the Edison Schools structure. Friendship made the decision to separate from Edison Schools, a task that would be difficult since it would require Friendship to build from scratch the infrastructure to support its campuses—Accounting, HR, Payroll, Technology Systems and Support, and Facilities Management.

"All of the management, financial, and technology systems were controlled by Edison. We only had a D.C. headquarters staff of four. I was not even a paid employee of the school. I was the volunteer CEO of Friendship. We knew it would not be an easy process. At the time, we had 3,000 students. How do you pull apart two organizations that had been intertwined so deeply? We needed to get experts but as a nonprofit public charter school we could not afford it," Hense recalled.

The VPP investment enabled Friendship to hire consultants and staff to plan for and execute a successful transition. Friendship and Edison worked together through the process. With support from VPP, Friendship was able to build its back office functions, hiring senior level staff to oversee finance and technology and to provide finance software to manage its accounting and payroll. The transition was completed a year ahead of schedule.

Delivering a World-Class Education

A significant part of VPP's investment was focused on helping Friendship's team design an academic program tailored to meet the specific needs of Friendship students. When students, particularly at the Middle and High School levels, arrive at Friendship, they are several grades behind in reading and math proficiency. This had to be at the heart of the new program.

"We saw immediately the interrelationship between struggling teachers and struggling classrooms. Attendance and discipline issues weren't spread out evenly among classrooms; there was a clear correlation between students' non-academic outcomes and teacher performance."

Patricia Brantley, Friendship COO

Art Curry, an educational consultant who had held senior management positions in the D.C. and Prince George's County traditional public school systems and who worked closely with VPP on many of its education investments, developed a strong working relationship with Friendship's Chief Academic Officer Michael Cordell to help Friendship achieve its aspiration to deliver a world-class education to all of its students.

"First we gathered data to identify the gaps and deficiencies. Then we looked at the best practices from all over the country: what worked with the populations similar to those at Friendship and [what were the] programs that we felt that could be taught to the staff without delay. The number one priority was programs that would take kids to greatness considering their gaps," Curry said.

The starting point for Cordell and the Friendship Academic team was the inadequacy of D.C.'s academic standards in 2005 which were below the rigor of AP and Early College courses that Friendship was implementing at its Collegiate Academy. Cordell and his team traveled the country meeting with consultants and educators to create an academic model that would achieve high standards for Friendship students. With support from Curry and other consultants, Cordell and his staff of educators defined, developed, and implemented a new academic design and curriculum tools that also was aligned to D.C. standards. Additionally, they created a professional development program for staff aligned to the new academic program and linked to student performance data.

"Art's vision and direction to me was on point and incredibly helpful. [He] pointed us in the right direction and made sure he referred us to different groups that were achieving success around the country. We used national based standards and then created our own Friendship standards. Consultants came in to help our teacher teams develop unit curriculum. Accordingly, we were way ahead of curve," said Cordell.

Accountability

The VPP investment also helped to support Friendship in creating a more effective assessment system to mea-



sure results and provide information to teachers so that they and their students could make adjustments and improve. VPP provided the initial funding and strategic assistance that led to the roll out of the Friendship Performance Management System in the fall of 2009. Friendship's performance-management system produces data dashboards for each student, teacher, classroom, and school—providing timely insights (qualitative and quantitative) on how students are doing on the skills they need to learn. This information, easily available to all teachers and shared with students and their families, allows for much earlier and more effective intervention when kids are having trouble.

The system enables teachers to share their performance data with their students, a requirement of Friendship's model. By showing students their data, students understand where they need to improve and take ownership of their academic performance. Recently Friendship added non-academic indicators related to students' well-being to its performance system.

At Friendship's first meeting to share the results of attendance and truancy disparities between classrooms, one principal remarked, "Kids can't just fall through the cracks anymore, because we can see them right when they need us. This is the data that I needed to ensure that every adult is focused on



the most important work.” In Brantley’s words, “We use the data as the common driver of urgency for leadership and urgency for management.”

Expansion

Friendship’s strategic plan called for the opening of two additional public charter schools. The first, Tech Prep, is a high-tech career academy designed to serve 600 students in grades 7-12, which fuses traditional academics with real-world technical applications to prepare students for careers in information technology, media technology, health-care, and environmental sciences. The

second, Friendship Prep, was to be the region’s first K-12 Spanish immersion and International Baccalaureate Program—considered one of the most rigorous academic programs in the nation—to serve 1,100 students at full capacity.

To support this expansion, VPP and San Francisco-based New Schools Venture Fund co-invested a total of \$4.5 million. While expansion did occur, it didn’t happen quite according to the original plan. In February 2008, as a result of several external and internal challenges and requests, Friendship amended its original aspirations and

goals, which allowed the organization to expand its thinking about growth to include developing schools and program options to meet student needs not only in D.C., but also in other urban communities. Therefore, instead of limiting its thinking to specifically building a K-12 International Baccalaureate Program, Friendship’s revised goal was to build new high-quality public schools, based on the Friendship design that respond to community needs and to leverage existing resources and opportunities.

In 2009, Friendship opened its Tech Prep Academy, and at the request of the D.C. Public Schools, took over the management of Anacostia High School — now known as The Academies at Anacostia.

It also achieved additional growth at its existing schools in the District.

Building a Development Function

As part of Friendship’s efforts to be sustainable for the long-term, Friendship built a development function to raise funds. With VPP’s support, Friendship hired a Director of Development and support staff to advance resource development strategies and objectives. In addition, VPP Board Member Jack Davies connected Friendship to CharityWorks, which resulted in a significant contribution.

The Results

During the course of the VPP investment, Friendship achieved enormous growth both in terms of the numbers of children served and the quality of its academic offerings. Guided by the vision of Donald Hense and the leadership of Pat Brantley and Michael Cordell, Friendship today is one of the most successful public charter school networks in the country.

Specific results during the VPP investment include:

- The successful and smooth transition from Edison Schools to become an independent public charter school network.
- Increased enrollments serving 1,139 more children.
- The opening of a new campus, Tech Prep in Washington, D.C.
- The transformation, renovation, and turnaround of the troubled charter Southeast Academy.
- Improved academic performance—between 2006 and 2009 overall math proficiencies scores rose 12%, reading scores rose more slowly at 1.2%, but are still trending upward.

- Increasing the number of students taking academically rigorous Advanced Placement exams from 52 to more than 750.
- Redesign of the academic program to be quality-focused and aligned to D.C. standards.
- Development of curriculum tools for teachers aligned to the new academic design.
- Development and implementation of a professional development program for staff.

The real results however are in the lives of students like I-Sha Davis who has a bright future ahead. Friendship has given her a firm academic footing and other significant life-skills that have guided her to college and taken her closer to her dream of becoming an engineer. VPP also provided Friendship with the funding and other support to make Donald Hense's vision of world-class schools for children in low-income communities a reality.

"VPP helped us achieve our dreams of being a well run small urban school system and well managed. They provided the dollars and a top-notch

KEY INFORMATION

- > Investment duration:
2005 – 2009
 - > **\$2,900,000** invested
- > **931** more children served (32% increase)
- > Revenue increased from **\$35.9 to \$59.4 million** during investment period
 - > **\$3,244,500** in leveraged funding
- > **1** new school in National Capital Region, **2** schools in Baltimore

consultant like Art Curry, as well as access to other consultants to advise and work with us on every single level. Without it, we would not have had a way to make it happen. Mario's faith in Friendship and in me has been the most rewarding thing. The worst thing is to struggle for decades and decades and no one believes in you," said Hense.



1201 15th Street, NW ■ Suite 420 ■ Washington, DC 20005

Tel: 202.955.8085 ■ Fax: 202.955.8087

info@vppartners.org ■ www.vppartners.org