The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was passed to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education. The Upper Darby School District has worked diligently to meet and exceed the requirements of this law. We promoted school-wide reforms that led to a comprehensive and cohesive system of learning supports for vulnerable children including those in foster care and those who were homeless. As a result of these reforms, the Upper Darby School District was able to quickly identify the needs of these children and provide resources and supports while continuing to set high goals and standards for their academic achievement and emotional stability. As we look toward ESEA reauthorization, it will be essential that federal policy provide the vision and structure for developing and sustaining learning supports in every school.

The first of the reforms included a restructuring of our schools so that every child was exposed to a standards-aligned curriculum that included scientific research-based intervention programs. Because behavior often impedes continued academic progress with vulnerable students, we implemented a positive school-wide behavior support system that included a Responsive Classroom model and targeted interventions. The “delivery of services” changed as we matched student need to evidence-based programs, with additional time and resources. In addition to the restructuring, we moved to a data-based decision-making model. This change was significant for vulnerable children, as research shows they often move six to eight times per year. These children are often forced to live with other family members and friends due to loss of housing and economic hardship. Our regularly scheduled benchmark testing and progress monitoring allowed us to plan for these children immediately upon entering school, providing needed instructional programs that could accelerate achievement. We intervened early and quickly, providing both academic and behavioral supports. We also did something very innovative to make certain there were no gaps in the “delivery of services” when vulnerable students changed buildings within the district. We created a temporary school in our database where we parked their data, such as standardized test scores and progress monitoring, so that the new school could immediately start the child in the correct program.

The second reform was a redefinition of our mission to include nothing less than the educational growth of ALL students and academic proficiency in reading and math by 2014. This reform set the bar for expectations for all students, including those in our most vulnerable populations. In Upper Darby, vulnerable students come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, speak one of 74 languages, and are often economically deprived. Homeless children are twice as likely as other children to repeat a grade in school, to be expelled or suspended, or to drop out of high school. At the end of high school, few homeless children are proficient in reading and math, and their estimated graduation rate is below 25%. We sought to break the cycle of academic failure for vulnerable children and improve the
educational prospects for this population with shared responsibility among all staff members for student success. Teams of professionals work collaboratively to support vulnerable children. These teams include school psychologists, teachers, principals, reading specialists, literacy coaches, and social workers. This reform also strengthens accountability.

The third reform was to build relationships with parents and guardians to foster an immediate home–school connection, promote academic success, and increase high school graduation rates. This was achieved in a variety of ways, from offering weekly open houses for parents, establishing electronic communication between parents and staff, and providing educational opportunities for parents via cable network and in-school information sessions on a regular basis. Translators were also available for parents who did not speak English.

We studied how our funding sources could be reallocated to support our initiative and to sustain the changes and growth we experience. We employed a “creative use of infrastructure,” reexamining how we could better design the school day, use our personnel more effectively, and use our funding in a more targeted way. Any staff member who is properly trained can provide intensive interventions for students including specialists and enrichment teachers. However, in order to sustain these programs and reforms and assure necessary supports for vulnerable children, adequate staffing and funding streams must be in place.

School psychologists in the Upper Darby School District used the environment of change to redefine their roles, broaden their responsibilities, and help design a program of outreach to parents. We were determined to share the responsibility of educating all children while promoting well-being and resiliency. With administrative support, we encouraged the adoption of the response-to-intervention framework as a way of providing targeted intervention for vulnerable children based on their level of need academically and behaviorally. School psychologists also became advocates, along with social workers and counselors, in order to provide the mental health services and special education services many of these children require. In order to increase our capacity to serve all students, we collaborated with surrounding universities that trained future psychologists and offered site-based internships, thus doubling our workforce.

In our district today, there are 44 students reported to be homeless and 34 students currently in foster care. Last year we had a total of 68 students reported to be in foster care. We believe there are many more children who are homeless or are in foster care than these numbers represent. The National Center on Family Homelessness reported in 2009 that there were 43,103 homeless children in Pennsylvania. The McKinney-Vento data collection system counts only children and youth, whose primary nighttime residence at the time of enrollment was a shelter, motel, or temporary arrangement in the housing of other people. At any point in time, the numbers that I have quoted can change and increase, and yet we do not have a required mandate for reporting after children are enrolled. We knew that we needed to provide a safety net for these children in which academic success
is guaranteed. Building a structure that could identify and support these students immediately upon enrollment became a district goal.

How did our reforms affect individual school buildings and vulnerable students?

Highland Park Elementary School, a school with an enrollment of 633 students, was chosen as a Pennsylvania Pilot Site for the implementation of response to intervention (RTI) in 2005. This school has a multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual student population, in which 66.4% of students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. After five years of implementation, we have found that RTI has strengthened the skills of our vulnerable students, both academically and behaviorally, as well as reduced the need for special education identification for many of our vulnerable students. Within this framework, we increased instructional time for reading to 120 minutes a day, exposing all students to standards-aligned and grade-level curricula. Based on benchmark and progress monitoring data, we matched student need to research-based intervention programs for an additional 45 minutes a day. These programs targeted specific skill deficits and were delivered in small group or one-on-one settings. This extended exposure to curriculum is critical for the success of vulnerable students. In the area of behavior, a positive school-wide climate was instituted where social skills were taught, practiced, and reinforced.

Highland Park as a school met its annual yearly progress goals, but most importantly, individual students demonstrated significant growth in areas of reading and math. In the year 2005, 61.5% of the total school population was proficient in reading. Based on the PA Department of Education's projections, 84.4% of our population will be proficient on our state PSSA reading test at the end of this school year. The economically disadvantaged population in 2005 was 43.9% proficient in reading, with the projected growth model indicating that 85.1% will be proficient by 2011. In 2005, 67.8% of the total school population was proficient in math. Based on projections, 91.3% of students will be proficient in math at the end of the school year. In 2005, the economically disadvantaged population was 54.5% proficient. By the end of this year, it is projected that 93.4% of this population will be proficient in math.

In 2009, Drexel Hill Middle School, with an enrollment of over 1,400 students, was chosen as a Pennsylvania Learning Site for Secondary RTI. At the middle school level, vulnerable children are more likely than other children to have academic and behavioral problems in school, higher rates of absenteeism, disciplinary referrals, and lower performance in the classroom on standardized achievement tests in reading and math. This middle school worked particularly hard in building database decision teams, which examined all of these variables for vulnerable children and attempted successfully to change the course of predicted failure. For behavior, they used a Restorative Practices Model, which were positive and allowed children opportunities to improve their behavior and reduce disciplinary referrals. The school met its annual yearly progress goals and vulnerable students showed growth in both reading and math. In 2005, 50.3% of the total school population was proficient in reading. Based on projections, 90.7% of students will be proficient in reading at the end of the school year. In 2005, 55.1% of the total school
population was proficient in math. It is projected that by 2011, 90.8% of students will be proficient in math. We have created a trajectory of success.

At the individual student level, we have seen vulnerable students experience great success. Here is one such story.

Nicky (the name has been changed to protect the student’s identity) entered the Upper Darby School District in kindergarten. At a year and a half of age, his father was murdered. His mother, a substance abuser, often neglected him and he was declared to be a “failure to thrive infant.” The Department of Human Services in Pennsylvania removed Nicky from his mother's care, and he was eventually placed in the custody of his grandmother. When he entered school in kindergarten, his behavior prevented him from learning, as he was often oppositional and disruptive. Clear expectations were set for this child using the Responsive Classroom Model, behavior intervention plans, and one-on-one school counseling. RTI supported his academic needs with intense instruction. In second grade, after our school psychologist completed an evaluation, Nicky was identified as a gifted student as well as having an emotional disability. We provided him with opportunities to practice appropriate behavior as well as increase his academic skill in a regular education program while supporting his emotional needs in the least restrictive special education program. Today, he is a gifted artist, talented musician, and recently he led his third grade class to the finals in the district-wide Brain Olympics, where he won first place.

The Upper Darby School District has worked diligently to close the achievement gap for our vulnerable students by ensuring high quality education, scientifically based instructional strategies, challenging academic content, special education services when needed, and a positive school climate to reinforce appropriate behavior. We have dramatically increased parental contact and promoted accountability for success throughout our schools. It is critical that education legislation address and fund the necessary learning supports that lead to positive student outcomes for all students, particularly those facing life’s greatest challenges.

We can only imagine the difficulties and uncertainties many of our most vulnerable students face daily. Providing the opportunities for their success is our job and our passion. The Upper Darby School District did not wait for any comic book hero to arrive on the scene before starting this process of change. Our educators realized that we already had more than 12,150 heroes, our students.