
Case Study: EastSide Charter School

Wilmington, DE | 480 students pre-K-8 | 8% Hispanic | 92% African-American | 87% Low-income
| 15% Special Ed

Profile: Lamont Browne, 2015 Ryan Award Winner

When Lamont Browne took over EastSide Charter School in Wilmington, Del., just over a quarter of students tested proficient on state reading exams. The school rotated through principals, racking up four leaders in just six years, and was being given one more shot to turn it around.

With the immense challenges before him, Browne focused on hiring the right people and training “*the heck out of them.*” He set a clear vision, secured parent support and built trust with his students by opening each day talking about his belief in their futures. He kept the staff focused on three important priorities rather than allowing them to be overwhelmed by everything that could be done. Weeks of orientation clearly laid out systems and structures so the staff could enforce the “EastSide way.” As a result, the school’s scores shot up, with students recording a 20-percentage point gain in reading that first year. EastSide continued to build on that success, and by 2014, 58 percent of kids were proficient or better in reading, and 63 percent in math (as opposed to 37 percent three years prior).

The school is located across the street from a development run by the Wilmington Housing Authority, and the effects of the concentrated poverty are reflected in some of the students’ experiences. By the school’s estimate, 45 percent of the student body has experienced some kind of

trauma. But here, under Browne’s direction, they were reading, adding, subtracting and learning. In 2014, three-quarters of them were meeting annual growth goals in math, and 62 percent were doing so in reading. When a financial scandal erupted at another Delaware charter school, the state tapped Browne to help. He spent 2015-2016 working to right the ship of Family Foundations Academy and sustain the success of EastSide while pushing it to the next level.

Conversations overheard in the halls of EastSide have a consistent undercurrent and provide a hint to the school’s winning formula: It’s all about improvement and growth, setting a higher bar or the next goal. Teachers are coached, leaders are coached, Browne himself remains a constant learner.



Principal Lamont Browne accepts his 2015 Ryan Award for exceptional achievement from Pat Ryan, Founder, and Nora Ligurotis, CEO (Accelerate Institute).

After earning a degree in business from the University of Delaware, Browne set out to work in the world of finance, but quickly decided it was not for him. He returned to the University of Delaware, where his grad school job was to tutor students in a very diverse school. However, he noticed the eighth-grade honors section had a very different makeup than the rest of the student body. Of the honors students, only two were black. “*A very diverse school, a very homogenous honors class*” he recalls. Those numbers have stuck with him as he embarked on a career to close the achievement gap. After leading a school in Philadelphia, Browne landed at EastSide in 2011.

EastSide's leaders use the first two weeks of school to make sure students have the essential routines down, with a strict emphasis on uniform codes, behavior rules and nightly homework to create a culture where students are not distracted by things that elsewhere may derail the classroom environment.

To create time to train teachers, students are dismissed early on Fridays. *"You have to have a talented, hard-working and committed staff, but also it's your job to take them to the level they need to be,"* Browne says.

Browne's systems reinforce the importance of gathering, reviewing and acting on student data. Every six weeks, the staff does a deep dive into interim assessment results. Teachers receive a comprehensive data report detailing student performance in their classes, then must fill out a template that prompts them to create a plan for how they're going to adjust instruction for each level of learner over the next six-week cycle. Teachers review the plans with instructional coaches.

Each EastSide teacher is assigned an instructional coach with a goal of biweekly observations. During regular meetings, the coach offers detailed feedback according to the Teaching Excellence Framework, a teacher evaluation and professional development program. The framework details what teaching looks like at each level, from setting instructional goals to checks for understanding. During feedback meetings, the coach opens by highlighting something positive from the observation. Praise is followed with questions designed to spark self-reflection. Together, teacher and coach develop an action plan, then plot out how they will monitor execution of the plan.

Parents say Browne also made them part of the EastSide team. *"When they did any kind of presentation for parents—open houses, the spring concert, award ceremonies—they always*

put a big emphasis on where the school was and where everyone knew the school could be," parent Alexis Simms says. *"You could see these big improvements in behavior or test scores. It was promising to see."*

Having invested a significant amount of work to build EastSide's culture, Browne is vigilant of it. During a recent meeting, he hears an EastSide teacher raise her voice down the hall. He holds up a finger and opens the door to call to her. *"We always have to model for our kids, right?"* he says without raising his own voice. She apologizes and returns to her students reframed. That constant tending of culture is what his staff credits with driving the school higher each year.

In his daily interactions with staff members, Browne consistently throws questions back to teachers asking how they could do better. He credits the approach with creating *"a self-awareness and a self-reflective culture that allowed room for the conversation of how we can do things differently,"* Browne says.

While he is often giving feedback during coaching sessions, Browne also encourages scrutiny of his own performance. Says Katelyn Whelan, EastSide's dean of special education: *"He's never satisfied with where he is."*

** In July 2016, Browne started as executive director of the Office of Autonomous Schools for Aurora Public Schools in Colorado. He turned the reins of EastSide and FFA schools over to Aaron Bass, a friend and former colleague whom Browne recommended to the board.*