
Case Study: Chicago Bulls College Prep

Noble Network of Charter Schools, Chicago, IL | 1,085 students, grades 9-12 | 91% low-income
| 33% African-American | 64% Hispanic | 13% special education

Profile: Tyson Kane, 2015 Ryan Award Winner

A few years after it opened in 2009, Chicago Bulls College Prep hit a plateau. The high school on the Near West Side of Chicago had positive results—the culture was set, teachers had established good classroom management—but students weren't growing in the ways they needed to, if they were to compete at top universities and graduate. *"The problem was us. We were the ones who were in the way. We weren't asking enough of kids because we were still doing too much for them,"* says 2015 Ryan Award winner Tyson Kane, the founding principal of Chicago Bulls. So the former consultant, who was accustomed to fixing problems in the corporate world, put a fresh set of eyes to the challenge before him.

Time always seemed like the biggest challenge for teachers. With four short years of high school, and 70-minute class periods, teachers often would lament that they didn't have enough time to cover all the ground they needed to cover to close the achievement gap. But Kane came to view that assumption as flawed. *"What it's doing is saying 'You're the fount of knowledge and the kids can't learn without you.' If we actually taught them how to learn without us, we would solve the time problem, and it wouldn't be only 70 minutes a day they were learning math, it would be four hours a day, because they could teach each other,"* he says. *"If we would focus more on training young people to educate themselves and the ways and dynamics that can occur, as opposed to delivering content, we would solve this rigor issue."*

Kane looked to the top-performing high schools in the nation for inspiration, traveling to elite prep schools. *"I fully expected to walk in and it was going to be really fancy and wonderful,"* Kane

recalls. But inside he was taken aback by the simplicity: Just kids sitting around a wooden table talking to each other. No fancy technology, just a chalkboard on the wall.

But to transplant this student-led discussion model to an economically disadvantaged student body in Chicago, he'd have to overcome some obstacles, as the students arrive to school from culturally different worlds. *"We knew we'd have to explicitly*

teach some of the different cultural things that would cause them to be successful in terms of being able to learn from each other," Kane says. Chicago Bulls students would need to learn to talk to people in a way to pull knowledge out of them. *"That's a whole basket of values and confidence and self-awareness,"* Kane says. *"Do I understand enough about my own ability and do I have the fear to be wrong? How do I access information when I don't know the right answer—not*

just in terms of looking it up in a book—but my comfort in approaching somebody and how I speak to them and the way that I come across and do I insult people, and so on. It's a whole basket of cultural implications, especially for a teenager."

And Kane didn't have a private school budget to create the 15:1 student-teacher class ratios he saw in those schools. He would have to figure out how to implement the model with one teacher leading classes of 25 to 35 kids. *"So you have to create a design where the teacher is actually irrelevant and the kids can teach themselves, literally, so the teacher doesn't have to be at the table,"* he says. The questions asked in that kind of classroom are different than what's the answer to 5 + 6. It's examining what happened in the discussion, who spoke first and why, what dynamic occurred after



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

that first person spoke and what tone was used. *"It's a very different kind of teaching than explicitly just saying, 'Raise your hand and give me the answer.' It teaches me to become empowered as a kid to know and access the people dynamic,"* Kane says. That ability to communicate and extract information sets up kids to be successful in college and the workplace. And yet it's something most schools, and not even most universities, teach, he says. *"More often, you get to your workplace and only then do people start trying to figure it out there. I don't know why we don't spend time doing it in schools. But that's the key to rigor."*

If he was to be the architect of such a shift for Chicago Bulls, Kane would need to understand this rigorous model inside and out. He started experimenting with these ideas in his own classroom. (He tries to teach at least one class a year when possible.) Kane wanted his staff to always demand high-quality student work and to increase student motivation and investment. He codified his thinking about how they could increase rigor into a 39-page guide called *"The Spark,"* infusing it with humor and inspiration alongside vivid and practical examples of how to pivot to a school where the students were in charge of their learning and where teachers were silent as kids debated tough questions and deepened their understanding.

Kane empowered his staff to be part of figuring out the answer as well. He hires people who respond well in environments where high autonomy is coupled with high accountability. *"I can't hold people accountable for performance or results if I don't give them the power or latitude to be able to do what they need to do to generate those results,"* Kane says. *"You're hired because you're smart. We want you to use your brain."*

Chicago Bulls started implementing the discussion-based model when junior Minnie Freeman was a freshman, so she's experienced both classrooms where teachers are standing in front of the board teaching and where students lead the discussion. *"The difference is, I always said, 'hmm-hmmm, I get what you're saying,' when the teacher was at the board. But when I am in small group or large group, I am able to more say, 'I don't (specifically) get this,' or, 'can you help me with this?'"* Freeman says.

Student Juanita Ledesma says the discussion-based model encourages students to work more intensely with their peers. *"It opens your mind to realize that in college, teachers are going to be talking and talking, it's really what you do outside of school that helps you really comprehend what you're learning in class,"* she says.

The focus on rigor has been central to Chicago Bulls' school identity as it has risen to the top of Chicago's high schools. A full 100 percent of Bulls graduates have been accepted to four-year universities, including Harvard, Northwestern and the University of Chicago. In 2015, the average ACT score for Chicago Bulls students ranked it in the top 10 of the city—a list that is dominated by selective-enrollment schools.

A Texas native, Kane started his career in investment banking. He transitioned into management consulting, then joined the Carlyle Group private equity firm in its Dallas turnaround division. Along with his team, he'd help create business plans for the company's new acquisitions then go to work implementing those plans. He wanted to contribute socially, so he started volunteering for KIPP in Texas, helping with operations and finance. But he kept finding himself wandering into the classroom, so much so that he signed up for Teach for America. He loved teaching, but felt like his prior career experience could help him tackle some of the big challenges in urban schools. When he learned about Noble, he was drawn to its focus on results. *"You have the latitude to do what you think is necessary. Just get results. I said nobody in education talks that way. That's the world I come from—pure meritocracy. Sign me up for that,"* Kane says. He became an assistant principal at Noble's Golder campus before founding Chicago Bulls.

With his success at Chicago Bulls, Noble tapped Kane to serve as the head of schools for its growing charter school network in Chicago. There's one more title he's added to his resume recently: social media sensation. Video of Kane breakdancing for his students at a school rally was shared thousands of times in spring 2016 and led to local news stories. It's not the first time he's danced for his students, believing in exemplifying one of the school's mottos: *"No fear, no embarrassment."*