

# Green Dot Takeover

*The Locke school story leaves questions unanswered*

## **Stray Dogs, Saints, and Saviors: Fighting for the Soul of America's Toughest High School**

By Alexander Russo

*Jossey-Bass, 2011, \$24.95; 232 pages.*

*Reviewed by Nathan Glazer*

Neither “stray dogs” nor “saints” play any role in Alexander Russo’s account of how Green Dot, a nonprofit organization that creates new charter high schools, managed to take over Locke High School in the Watts area of Los Angeles, and what it achieved in its first year managing it.

Stray dogs are occasionally found on Locke’s substantial campus, and the “Saints” are its athletic teams, which on occasion have had great success. Alain L. Locke High School was built after the Watts riots of 1965. It opened in 1967 and was part of a substantial effort to improve conditions in Watts. For some years it was the pride of the area. But it was an inner-city high school, initially primarily black, in later years increasingly Hispanic, with all the attributes common to such: poor scores on the various tests, district, state and national, that have come over the years to evaluate schools; poor attendance; low graduation rates; and serious student discipline problems.

But Locke has received much more attention than any other inner-city high school. It was the subject of an earlier book, *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach For America* by Donna Foote, which tells us that President George H. W. Bush visited it in 1988, President Bill Clinton in 1999. Tipper Gore, wife of former vice president Al Gore, Senator John McCain, Ice Cube, Muhammed Ali, Kareem

Abdul-Jabbar, and James Olmos, the star of *Stand and Deliver*, have all been visitors. Green Dot’s takeover of Locke was covered in great detail in the *Los Angeles Times* and in an article in the *New Yorker*.

Margaret Spellings, then secretary of education, visited a Green Dot school in Los Angeles in 2007, and the principal of Locke at the time, Frank Wells, then in his third year (he had lasted longer than his recent predecessors), spoke up about his frustrations. He had effected some improvement in school discipline and in academic tests, “but the district kept on sending him ineffective tenured teachers who were extremely difficult to remove.” (In *Relentless Pursuit*, we learn of the

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final successful removal of one teacher, after three years of effort and a great mass of documentation.)

Reporters covered Spellings’s visit, and Wells’s intervention. “It sounded as though Wells was calling out his employers in public, proposing a Green Dot takeover of the school—and committing professional suicide.” Green Dot had already established some small charter high schools, which were attracting the better students of the neighborhood, a source of frustration to Wells. Steve Barr, a progressive political activist who had founded Green Dot, had his eye on taking over and remaking a large urban high school. Some teachers at Locke were interested in Green Dot and had met with Barr. And California law makes it possible for a vote of teachers in a school to turn that school into a charter. One would like to know more on how that law works, and what the state provides to such charters, but Russo is skimpy on these details, as on so many others.

After initial skepticism, Wells came to support the teachers pressing for a Green Dot takeover. A majority of teachers voted for it, at which point Wells was summarily removed from the principalship. Coming out of a meeting at 6 p.m., he was met by the area director, who told him “he was being reassigned to the district office and asked for Wells’s keys.... There was no opportunity for [Wells] to tell his teachers or explain to the kids. He never went back into the building. It was less than a week after he’d publicly voiced support for Green Dot.” One would like to know more about how this happened to a rather successful principal, one who had been doing better than his predecessors.

## book reviews

Despite union and district efforts to overturn the vote, the Green Dot supporters succeeded, and after a year of transition, in which there was a good deal of disorder, Green Dot took over the school, with a new principal and new teachers. (One distinction of Green Dot among charter school organizations is that its teachers are unionized, but we are not told anything more about the union except that it is not the one that had represented the Locke teachers.)

One would like to know more about Green Dot's philosophy, practices, model, if any, but all one manages to learn is that, as one teacher explained to the students, "at the new Locke, teachers cared about their students, wanted to help them pass their classes, and would not abandon that effort [implying the former teachers did not 'care,' etc.?]. 'I'm going to shake your hand

every day, no matter what [one teacher tells her new class].... Don't worry about germs—I've got lots of hand sanitizer.'" There are no details about Green Dot's recruitment of teachers, training, etc. The new teachers, as one of the holdovers notes, were much more white than the old Locke staff, "despite all efforts to recruit minorities."

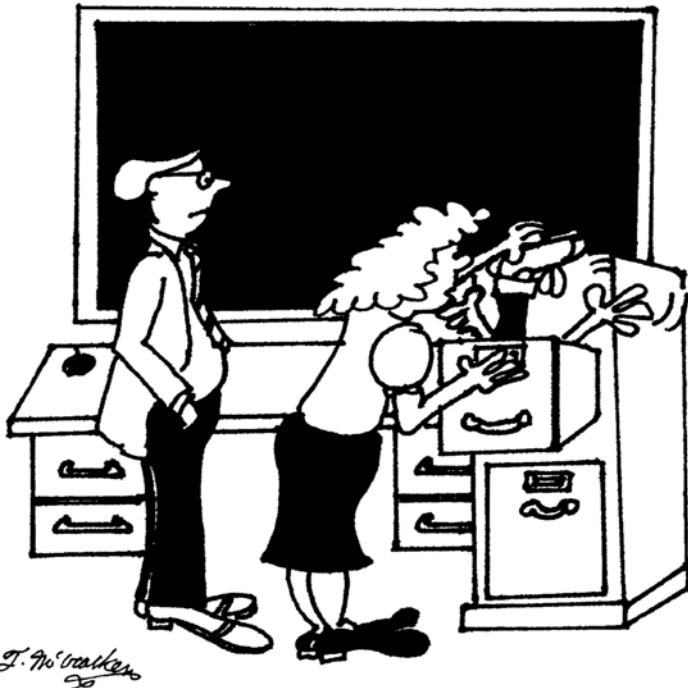
Wells was not selected by Green Dot for the principalship of the new Locke. He is African American, came out of San Francisco housing projects, and has been in military service. Veronica Coleman, his replacement, "is the product of a childhood on a Michigan farm and years playing sports." Russo is rather sparse on details about race. One does not learn until well into his book that Wells is black.

What is clear about Green Dot is its commitment to small high schools, and

so the reorganized Locke consisted of six schools. Efforts at creating smaller schools within Locke had already taken place, in response to No Child Left Behind prescriptions, but we are told little about these: their problems, successes, failures. In the new Locke there were to be a number of small baby Lockes, each beginning with one class of ninth graders, but scheduled to add an additional grade each year until they became full four-year high schools. The old Locke students were organized into two subschools, one called "white" and one "black," with appropriate uniform dress requirements, and these were slated to disappear, losing a grade a year as the baby Lockes added new grades.

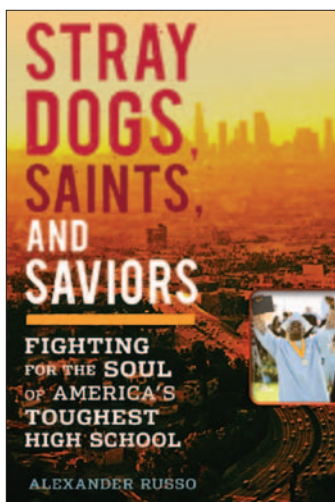
Russo, an experienced education journalist, received a Spencer Foundation Education Journalism Fellowship at Columbia to write this book, which covers the story of Green Dot, of its efforts to take over an inner-city high school, and of its first year managing Locke, with briefer coverage of its second year. Predictably, attendance, academic achievement, and the rate of graduation improved. Locke had a new teaching body, one likely more enthusiastic, harder working, and perhaps better qualified in some respects than the old, and a new administrative team. It saw the effects of this new effort: the Hawthorne effect, it has been named, after famous experiments on productivity in the 1930s.

Donna Foote, in her book on Locke written a few years before the take-over, focuses on four teachers who came through Teach For America (TFA), which had sent a good number of young teachers to the school. They made up for years a large percentage of Locke's teaching force. It is not



"I'm just filing a grievance."

clear whether they still do under Green Dot's management; Russo does not mention the TFA influence at Locke. One learns a great deal in Foote's book about the remarkable effort TFA puts into recruiting the best possible students for its enterprise, the energy and resources it devotes to evaluating its recruits, and the awesome effort these young people put into their teaching. They get good results—no wonder. Some of those who feature in Russo's



book, we learn from Foote, came to Locke through TFA. One wishes Russo had told half as much as Foote does about how Green Dot recruits, trains, and evaluates its teachers.

The first year of Green Dot management of Locke was 2008–09, the second 2009–10; we

are now past the end of the third year, at which point the old Locke fully disappeared, absorbed into the new smaller Lockes. One wonders how things are going. It is the unfortunate

fact about school reform stories that by the third or fourth year many of the reformers are off doing other things: they have gone on to graduate school, become administrators and consultants, and the like. This is true of the TFA recruits, too, whose contract is only for two years. One wonders how well Green Dot holds its teachers. Perhaps a book on the third or fourth year of a successful reform would teach us something about how initial gains can be maintained.

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